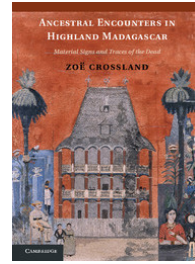

Book Review



Ancestral Encounters in Highland Madagascar: Material Signs and Traces of the Dead. By Zoë Crossland. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014, xv + 381 pp. ISBN 9781107036093. US\$ 99.00 (Hardcover).

Crossland has crafted a fascinating and richly detailed historical ethnography of the Imerina kingdom (*fanjakana*) of the Malagasy highlands. Her time frame spans the late eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries, the reigns of King Andrianampoinimerina (*ca* 1787 – *ca* 1810), his son Radama I (*ca* 1810–1828), and successor monarchs to the last highland queen, Ranavalona III, who was deposed in 1896 following French colonization. The author draws on existing ethnographic, historical and archaeological accounts as well as her own archaeological investigations to develop an innovated perspective on this period that witnessed political upheaval, warfare, and slave raiding alongside Christian missionization and other European contacts. Her theme is the interactions between the living and the dead, especially ancestors, whose material signs include royal tombs and shrines on descent group lands, as well as specific objects such as silver coins that reference the sacred blessings from the ancestors (*hasina*).

This is not an ethnography or history in the conventional sense, and a short review cannot do justice to this impressive, ambitious book. The author's focus on the "signs through which the dead were made present and brought into relationship with the living" (*p.* 3) is explicitly at odds with the recent turn towards things or materiality in anthropology and archaeology. This turn has unnecessarily neglected the meaningfulness of the physical world, the representational qualities of things as signs. To this end Crossland engages the semeiotics (sign theory) of American logician Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), which provides complex insights into the material characteristics of signs (the variant spelling is used to signal differences with other semiotic theories, *e.g.*, the more popular semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure). This is a major goal of the book, to extend Peircean constructs to encompass meaning, materiality, and experience in the past.

Peirce's semeiotics have been utilized by ethnographers in the latter decades of the twentieth century (*e.g.*, PARMENTIER 1987; KEANE 1997). Although a few archaeologists have been incorporating aspects of his sign theory since the start of this century (PREUCEL 2006), most such efforts have been limited to a simplified version of his triadic distinction of symbol, index, and icon. Peirce's work is voluminous and dense, and much of it remains unpublished. Crossland selected certain of his major ideas, reworked them and even renamed some of them to make them more comprehensible. They are carefully introduced and explained in each chapter by their application to the specific data under consideration. She presents new interpretations of events and their consequences in Malagasy history, some of which challenge conclusions previously reached by ethnographers and historians and which greatly extend the potential of archaeological and other material-based analyses.

The chapters are centered on various "encounters" that brought the living, the dead, and material signs into historicized fields of action that affirmed or transformed their relationships. Crossland locates these encounters within the contexts of ongoing history-making, arguing that history and the landscape were mutually constituted in these interactions to form the historical and material trajectories that her research traces.

The book is composed of an introduction, epilogue, and six chapters divided into two parts that evince a spatial rather than a chronological organization. Part I, "The Center," deals with the encounters of missionaries, highlanders, and the ancestors in the capital of the Imerina kingdom, the city of Antananarivo mostly during the reign of King Radama I. Part II, "The Frontier," moves out to the western periphery and to Radama's father's conquests to incorporate the Andrantsay region into his kingdom, which became

Imerina's sixth district (Vakinankaratra), and the less successful war campaigns of Radama himself. The capture of land entailed appropriating its ancestral past, reworking ancestral agency and kinship to remake the history that was the necessary condition for people's relationships to their sovereign.

The introduction provides a brief background on the highland Malagasy region, European contacts and major historical sources, and the rationale for the author's approach against competing theoretical frameworks. Part I begins with Chapter 1, "Uncertain Signs and the Power of the Dead." Readers are compellingly drawn into highland royal ritual through the semeiotics of fire in association with ancestral agency and the calendrical rites of renewal for the king. For this purpose Crossland introduces Peirce's three modes through which semeiosis (sign-object relationships) operate — icon, index, and symbol — along with the third element unique to Peircean semeiotics — the interpretant that mediates the sign-object relationship.

In Chapter 2, "Recognition and Misrecognition in the Missionary Encounter," Crossland's close readings of the letters and accounts of the missionaries of the London Missionary Society in the 1820s yields intriguing insights into how their reactions to their encounters with the living (including King Radama) and the dead involved their recognition of and reactions to the familiar and unfamiliar in this new landscape. For example, Malagasy houses were not dissimilar in appearance and materials from those of rural Wales from which the early missionaries came, and this iconic relationship elicited certain feelings or responses. This chapter is guided by the three Peircean modes for the operation of interpretants, which are integral to Peirce's version of phenomenology. The author renames these as "affective" (feeling, the first category of quality or potential), energetic (the second category of reaction or response), and habitual (the third category of habitual practice or mediation). These are meant to form a sequence: out of feelings and then reactions comes the search for "thirdness," for regularity or continuity that may in fact result in a change of habits.

Chapter 3, "The Signs of Mission," considers the other side — how the highlanders reacted to the missionaries' actions, especially in their building and running of schools, and how these impacted the sovereign's relationships with his subjects in the capital and the provinces. Crossland argues that Radama used the schools for his own purposes to subvert these relationships in terms of how the flow of *hasina* (treated as a Peircean qualisign) was channeled through them. The missionaries were oblivious to these uses and consequences of their actions; for example, unknowingly af-

firming the semeiotic agency of silver coins they gifted to Radama that operated as Peircean tokens of *hasina*.

Part II opens with Chapter 4, "Conquering the Andratsay: Familiar Histories," which further examines the dynamic relationships between landscape and history through the manipulation of kinship ties of the local descent groups and nobility to the sovereign. Crossland utilizes Mikhail Bakhtin's "chronotope" as a complement to Peircean semeiotics to examine the spatiotemporality of the constitution of the *fanjakana*, which could both include and exclude specific descent groups by extending or cutting off access to their history-making. History (*tantara*), which was enacted and performed, was not so much about the past as about the future potential of a group, the progeny who would maintain the inheritance and obligations to the ancestors. To have one's history taken away was an act of enslavement, and many actual slaves were created in these wars of conquest, a number of them sold in markets. History was materialized by signs of the dead in the landscape — ancestral tombs, erected stones, and abandoned villages, some of which were investigated during the author's archaeological research (1997–2010) in the Vakinankaratra region.

Crossland approaches history-making through semeiosis: history as a sign relation that interprets material signs, be they texts, artifacts, or landscape features, in alignment with the event (object) and the interpretant (representation of history). Andrianampoinimerina reworked history, realigning its semeiotic ties, not only through the manipulation of kinship and elision of local descent group genealogies but also by changing the landscape, as ancestral tombs were abandoned and new standing stones (another form of *tantara*, history), especially the "stones of state" (*orimbato*), were erected as a visible sign of the extension of the *fanjakana*.

Chapter 5, "Standing Stones and the Semeiosis of Reproduction," examines in detail the monuments in the town of Betafo, the administrative center for the conquered Andratsay region. Standing stones include both the "stones of state" and the earlier menhirs erected in memory of the dead (*tsangambato*) associated with tombs. These stones acted as signs and witnesses — they re-presented absent persons — and thus could pass on communications between individuals, whether living or dead. With this semeiotic framework Crossland examines how the stones operated within the fields of other developing sign relations. In particular, the author reconstructs the complex web of relationships in which the growth of wealth was analogous with the growth of kin. The standing stones mediated the movement of people in and out of kinship and ancestry relations through debt, enslavement, and adoption as

mediators for economic exchanges between the living and the dead.

Chapter 6, “*Zone Rouge: Encounters on the Frontier*,” pulls together these loose strands of highland Malagasy history and Peircean semeiotics from the vantage point of the peoples of this hinterland region and their experiences and the aftermath of this history. For them the nineteenth century was a period of tremendous social upheaval, physical violence, disorder, enslavement, and criminality, especially at the hands of Radama’s officers and soldiers, with increasing political instability during the reigns of his successors. It was marked by the disturbing appearances of more strangers (Europeans), possession cults, banditry, attacks from the west, and by the end of the nineteenth century, a rebellion against the *fanjakana* known as *menalamba*, or “red *lamba*,” the shawl used by nobility (and also to shroud the dead). The right to use the color red, which had connections with the dead and the flow of ancestral blessings (*hasina*), had once been restricted to royalty, but the restriction was loosening as its interpretants were multiplying. Crossland draws on Peirce’s notion of red as a “qualisign,” a feeling for the potential of a particular quality (firstness) that was concretized in a specific object, a token (sinsign). In a more speculative interpretation not so easily supported by historical texts, the author suggests that a new style of red-slipped pottery that became popular in the west just as political instability was peaking was part of this semeiotic re-orientation within a broadening field of interconnected sign relationships that included rice, land, ancestors, and women.

In the brief Epilogue, “Ghostly Presences,” Crossland adds her final arguments in favor of using “a Peircean semeiotic lens,” noting that competing approaches separate “meaning” from “presence” or restrict meaning to the contrasts between signs, not allowing for certain signs to also act as interpretants in constantly unfolding fields of semeiotic relations. She further concludes that “the writing of history and archaeology is a semeiotic project that gathers the past to the present through its material traces” (p. 265).

The book is nicely illustrated with maps, modern photographs, and historic images including photos from William ELLIS’s (1838) *History of Madagascar*. There is a much appreciated glossary, king list, and pages of useful endnotes for specialists, keeping the text uncluttered. Some readers will desire more information on specific aspects of Imerina religion and politics or a more traditional narrative history, but those were not the author’s intentions. Many archaeologists will rightly wonder how they can utilize the Peircean concepts Crossland deploys in the absence of the abundant historical and ethnographic data available to her. Semioticians may critique her selective reworking of Peirce’s concepts. Nevertheless, this is an innovative and important book for its theoretical grounding, methodological achievements, and the interdisciplinary integration of so many strands of data relevant to nineteenth-century Madagascar. Crossland demonstrates how humans interact with their world in ways that cannot be distinguished as either material or cognitive and allow for feelings and potentials that cannot easily be articulated. Her book will be of value to Africanists interested in Madagascar, ancestral cults, kingship, kinship, and European contact and to anyone else interested in semeiotics, materiality, meaning, landscape, and history.

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