
Personhood, Collectives, and the Human-Animal Distinction: The Cases of the Cameroon Grassfields and Madagascar

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Abstract: This article compares the ways personhood and collectives are conceptualised and constituted in two different ethnographic settings – the Grassfields of west Cameroon and Madagascar – and how this sheds light on the ways of conceiving the human-animal distinction. The first part of the article examines the means by which persons and collectives are conceptualised and constituted in both ethnographic contexts, while the second part analyses two modalities of the human-animal relationship – capturing and hunting – while relating them to “Malagasy and Grassfields personhood” respectively. In addition, an attempt is made to elicit the differences and similarities in the ways the human-animal distinction is conceptualised in both ethnographic contexts.

Keywords: personhood, collectives, taboo, Madagascar, Cameroon Grassfields, human-animal distinction, ontology

Résumé : Cet article se propose d'étudier comparativement la manière dont la conceptualisation et la constitution de la personne et de diverses entités collectives déterminent la nature de la relation homme-animal dans les Grassfields de l'ouest Cameroun et à Madagascar. La première partie tente d'esquisser les contours et le contenu de la “personne Grassfields” et de la “personne Malgache” en relevant tout autant leurs différences que leurs similitudes. La deuxième partie décrit et analyse deux modalités de la relation homme-animal – la capture et la chasse – à Madagascar et dans les Grassfields respectivement, pour mesurer comment et à quel degré les différences dans la conceptualisation de la personne influent sur la nature de la relation homme-animal, dans chaque contexte ethnographique.

Mots-clés : personne, collectifs, tabou, Madagascar, Ouest Cameroun, distinction homme-animal, ontologie

Introduction

The aim of this article is to provide a comparative exploration of the ways in which personhood, self, and what I shall call “collectives” are constituted and how this impinges upon the human-animal distinction in two ethnographic contexts: the Cameroon Grassfields and Madagascar. After a brief presentation of the issues pertaining to method and terminology, the first section examines how personhood is conceptualised and constituted through the exchanges occurring during marriage and initiation in the southern parts of the Cameroon Grassfields, while the second section examines how taboos as both rules and performative acts constitute persons in various Malagasy groups. The third section moves beyond the apparent differences and extends the analysis from persons and selves to other “social entities” or “collectives.” It argues that while the medium through which persons and other social entities come into being in each ethnographic context are different (rites of passage versus taboos), there are also striking similarities (the conceptualisation of agency, self, body, and temporality) in the way they are produced. Finally, the last part examines the activities of capturing and hunting among the Vezo of western Madagascar and the Bangoua of the southern Cameroon Grassfields against their respective ethnographic backgrounds so as to elicit the similarities and differences in these specific modalities of the human-animal relation. It argues that the different ways of perceiving (and achieving) personhood in each ethnographic context gives these relations a specific twist. The article therefore also intends to extend the discussion of ontology from the South American context to examples set in Africa and Madagascar (Kohn 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004; see also Nadasdy 2007 for North America and Willerslev 2007 for northeastern Siberia).

Comparison: The Three “W’s” (Why, What, and When)

The comparative method has to address the questions of why, what, and when, which could be called the three “W’s.” Why the Cameroon Grassfields, Madagascar, and personhood? Having read many articles and books addressing the concept of the person in different parts of the world, I was struck by the extent to which Malagasy personhood, and identities in general, was prominently conceptualised and performed in a negative/proscriptive way. This contrasts with Grassfields personhood, which is construed prominently in prescriptive terms (see Tsékénis 2015).¹ If someone wanted to look for an “objective” reason for choosing these ethnographic cases, then it would be this striking difference. The subjective part of this objective choice, as it were, is that it was obviously determined by the topic/concept of personhood, which has been one of my main research interests for the last several years. However, it has occurred to me that there is much more than subjectivity or arbitrariness in choosing personhood. Indeed, being the nexus of multiple kinds of social relations and practices, and unfolding in various contexts, it is a “total social fact” in the Maussian sense of the term (Mauss 1990 [1925]). As such, it can prove to be extremely productive (see, for example, Lambek and Strathern 1998).

What to compare? After having read the introduction, the reader will have noticed that there is an imbalance between the geographical units under comparison both in terms of scale and of homogeneity. While according to certain criteria – language, ethnicity, culture, and history – the Cameroon Grassfields are relatively homogeneous, the same can certainly not be sustained for Madagascar.² However, by focusing on an institution/cultural practice specific to, and widespread in, Madagascar, such discrepancies can be mitigated. This results in bringing out a kind of unity (taboo as shared by the majority of – if not all – Malagasy speakers) and, consequently, allows the scale of comparison to be somewhat reduced at the same time by compiling a representative ethnographic sample.³ To do this, three conditions must be fulfilled: the sample must be as diverse as possible (condition 1) so as to achieve a high degree of generalisation; the making of the sample is, in turn, subject to two kinds of constraints: the quantity and quality of material available (condition 2) and how relevant this material is for the comparative endeavour (for example, what do these ethnographies tell us about taboos in Madagascar?) (condition 3). In our case, the ethnographic sample comprises the following Malagasy groups: the Vezo of the western coast (Belo-sur-Mer) (generally

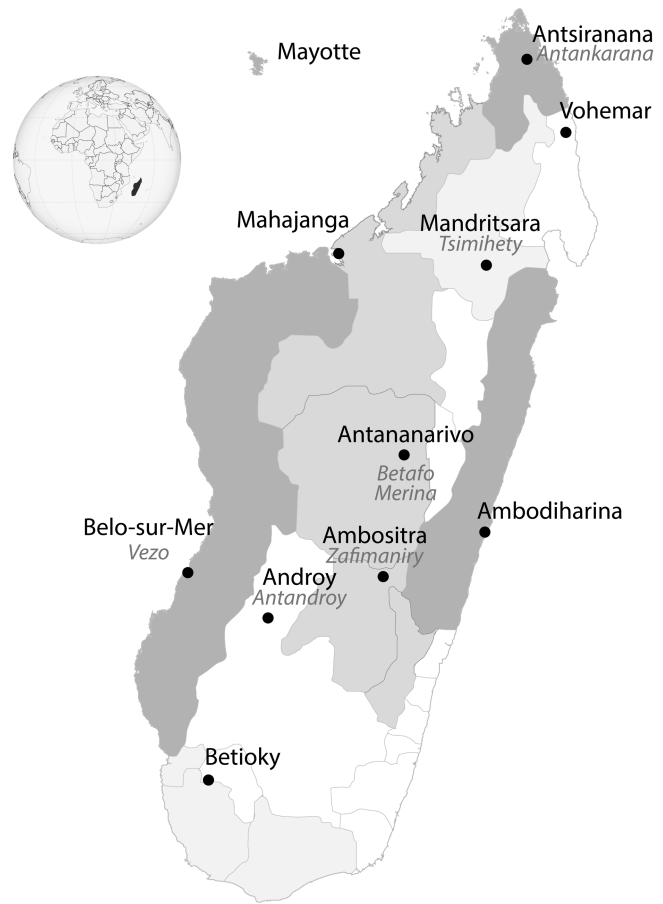


Figure 1: Distribution of Malagasy ethnic groups and communities compared (courtesy of the author)

classified as Sakalava, but see Astuti 1995b, 466); the northern Sakalava (Mahajanga); the Betsimisaraka on the east coast (Ambodiharina); the Antankarana in the extreme north (Antsiranana; Ambondromifehy); and Mayotte (Boina). In the descriptions and analyses that follow, I will draw on the Malagasy material mainly from the ethnographies of these groups, although additional studies will be mentioned in certain cases in the text and particularly in the final section (the description and analysis of the capturing of sea tortoises among the Vezo). Figure 1 shows the distribution of the Malagasy groups. The communities/ethnographies in dark grey constitute the “core sample” around which the comparative themes are articulated throughout the sections in this article. Ethnographies of decreasing relevance to the comparison are shaded in medium and light grey.

The reader may have noticed that from the third and fourth sections, the scale of comparison surreptitiously shifts from the “Cameroon Grassfields” and “Madagascar” to the “Vezo” and the “Bangoua” (a polity in the southern Grassfields). One might rightly object

that, in this instance, representativeness is not met and, consequently, that the findings will lack the required degree of generality. One answer to this objection is that panther hunting was an extremely widespread activity in the Cameroon Grassfields overall and that the capturing and tabooing of the sea tortoise is not a prerogative of the Vezo alone. Although panthers in the Grassfields have not been present since the 1940s approximately, the beliefs surrounding this much admired and feared predator as well as its “humanisation” (see final section) still captivate the imagination of contemporary Grassfields inhabitants (see Argenti 2007, 37, 56). The sea tortoise, for its part, is tabooed (*fady*) not only among the Vezo of the western coast (Astuti 2000, 2007) but also among the Sakalava of Vohehar in the northeastern part of the island and the Mahafaly and the Antandroy, both inhabitants of southeast Madagascar (Van Gennep 1904, 286–289) (in light grey on Figure 1).

Last but not least comes the question of “when,” which I will relate to both the kind of ethnographic material used in this article and the period during which it was collected. The material from the Grassfields is based on first-hand field research and was gathered during fieldwork conducted from 1995 to 1997 as well as from a one-month fieldtrip 14 years later in 2011. One exception to this is the description of the panther hunt in the final section, which was recorded by Charles-Henry Pradelles de Latour (1991, 189–192). The Malagasy material, on the other hand, is based exclusively on library work.⁴ The bulk of the Malagasy ethnographic material (in dark grey on Figure 1) was gathered during the 1990s, with the exception of Michael Lambek’s first visits in Mayotte, which date back to the mid-1970s. What is more, most of these scholars are still actively engaged in fieldwork, regularly updating their material. One could therefore consider these ethnographies to be more or less coterminous in time, which confers to them a kind of “synchronicity.”

Some clarifications on terminology should be provided at this stage. In this article, I have been, and will be, using the terms *collective* and *social entities*. A collective/social entity refers to the instantiation of relations, energies, and agents (human and non-human: persons, ancestors, spirits, animals, objects, and so on) resulting in the formation of “groups” of varying magnitude. These terms are broad in purpose so as to be able to accommodate different kinds of instantiations. Second, they are vague enough so as to include non-human agents. Indeed, as will become clearer in the course of the description and analysis, there are both similarities and differences in the way social entities come into being in the two ethnographic contexts. Third, these

terms highlight the processual aspect of such formations as well as their emergent quality.

Personhood, Self, and Agency in the Cameroon Grassfields

The Cameroon Grassfields area roughly corresponds to the present northwest and southwest provinces of Cameroon (see Figure 2). Albeit perceptibly different from both its southern forest neighbours and the northern groups on the Adamawa Plateau, the Grassfields is far from being homogeneous. The chiefdom of Batié is located in the southern part of the Grassfields in the district of Hauts-Plateaux, of which the capital is the chiefdom of Baham (see Figure 3). Among the many rituals through which persons are produced in the Cameroon Grassfields, I chose to elaborate on initiation and marriage because, first, they are intrinsically linked since, until the recent past, boys and girls could not marry unless they had undergone initiation and, second – and more relevant for my argument – one can clearly perceive the different social entities coming into being (from persons to collectives) through the gendered exchanges that unfold during such occasions.⁵

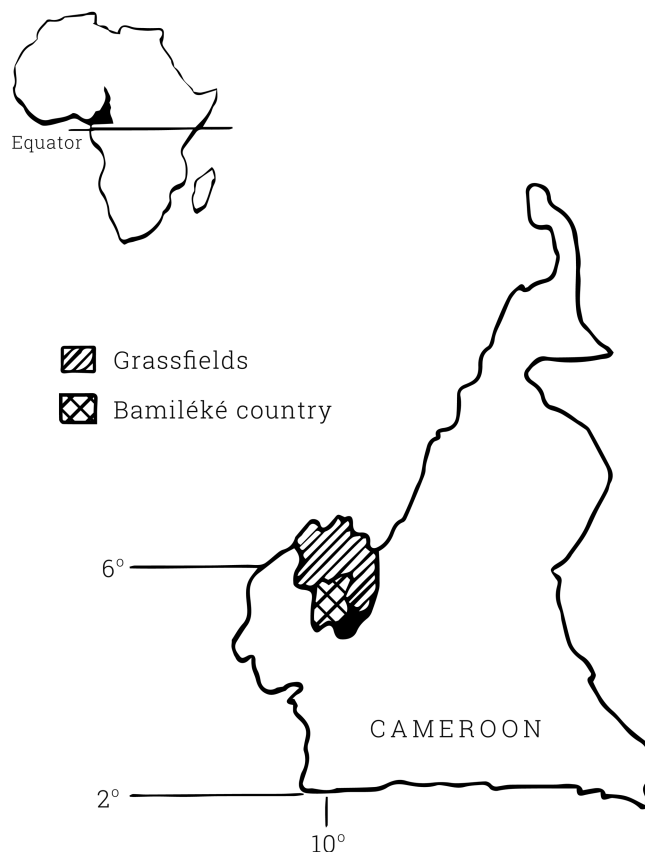


Figure 2: Cameroon and the Grassfields (courtesy of the author)

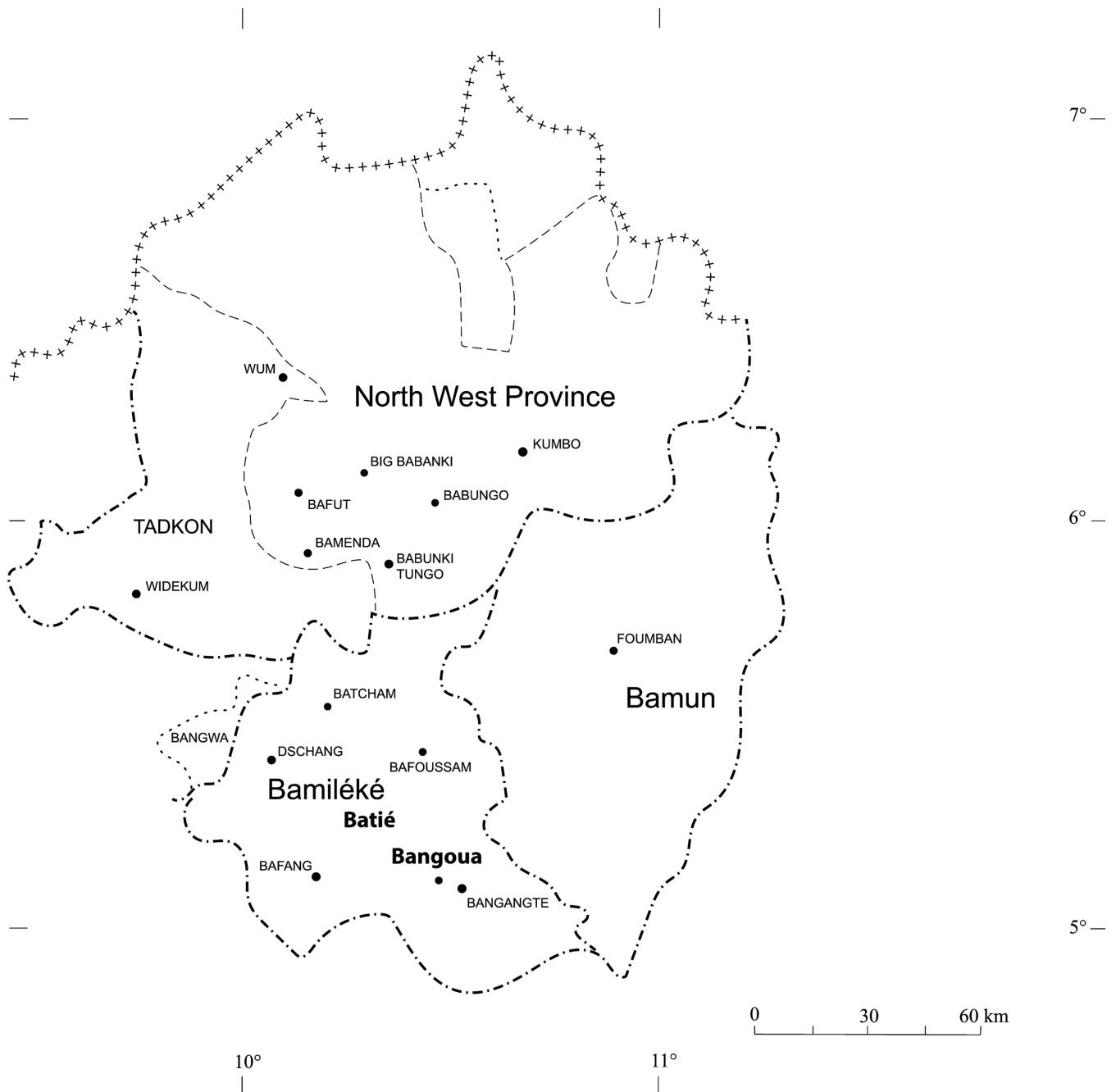


Figure 3: Batié and the southern Grassfields (courtesy of the author)

Initiation

Neonates in the Cameroon Grassfields are otherworldly and androgynous (Argenti 2001, 2011; Diduk 2001). Up to the age of approximately eight or nine, Batié boys and girls perform both “male” and “female” work. Therefore, both boys and girls fetch water, gather firewood, sweep the yard, and help in the fields on school holidays. Moreover, children do not follow sexualised (eating) taboos. However, as they grow older and reach their

teens, boys and girls comply with the gendered division of labour. The gendering of both boys and girls has consequently already begun when the initiates are required to undergo puberty rites. The boy’s initiation comprises two stages. During the first stage, the ingestion of a mixture that only men can swallow and that is supposed to contain a parcel of the regenerating energy *kaŋ* activates the boy’s male part. The second stage of the ritual associates the initiates with male occupations: the

cowries and *nduop* textiles adorning the male bodies during the ritual dance refer to trade and status acquisition (a men's prerogative), while horns designate the power of men in appropriating things of the "exterior" and the wild.

A girl's female part is activated by means of a ritual associating them with pregnancy and birth; at the moment they give birth, they are reborn. During her internment, which lasts nine weeks, the girl is "grown" like a foetus inside her house/ womb. This is made more explicit by the fact that women liken the ritual practices following birth with the ones once endured in the seclusion house during puberty rites, from which they departed after nine weeks. The girl's female part (and the subsequent eclipsing of her male part) is thus activated through the very female (and ritual) experience of birth (for example, of what was yet to come, to be "really" experienced) – in other words, she was made to see her own (re-)birth before experiencing the birth of her child.

Marriage

Marriage exchanges can be divided into two periods.⁶ A preliminary period during which the bride-to-be and her future father-in-law exchange services and gifts, while the suitor exchanges services and gifts with his future relatives (father-in-law, mother-in-law, and her co-wives). The prestation called "goat of father's child" puts an end to these exchanges of services and gifts, signals the end of this preliminary period, and inaugurates the second period, which is considered to be more "official." During the preliminary period, the bride-to-be is transformed by her father-in-law into a marriageable woman. Indeed, the father-in-law acts as a husband (making gifts of palm oil, salt, and small amounts of money, all of which are "male" products), thus activating her female part (she cooks for him). These statuses are also expressed (linguistically) in reciprocal terms of address: the girl calls her future father-in-law *da khue* (firewood gatherer), a term commonly used by a spouse toward her husband; reciprocally, her father-in-law calls her *njwi a* (my spouse). Conversely, the groom-to-be is compelled to act like a husband: gathering firewood for his mother-in-law and her co-wives and performing various tasks for his future father-in-law.

Subsequently, the suitor offers a goat and a tin of palm oil to the girl's father and half a tin of palm oil to her mother. Here again, the suitor hands over typically "male" products, being compelled to do so by his father and mother-in-law. This prestation is important in that it broadens the circle of kin and non-kin (the "girl's side," wife-givers) and involves the members of the cognatic group of each side. "The goat of the father's child" is

followed by "the pouring of the raffia wine," where the co-wives of the groom's father hand over cooked "male" products (plantains, goat meat, firewood, and salt) to the girl's side on behalf of the husband's side. The girl's side also offers cooked food (but not plantain, which is "male"), which is eaten by both sides; the girl's side can be seen as – collectively – feeding the husband's side just as a wife feeds her husband. The groom offers raw "male" products (palm oil, plantain, and raffia wine) to the co-wives of the girl's mother, while the co-wives hand over the palm oil to the girl's father, and the girl's side offers "female" products (yams, potatoes, and/or taro) to the husband's side.

The conjugal bond is instituted during a ceremony called "wedding meal." But before this occurs, the girl (female agnate) must be severed (detached) from her lineage. This separation is activated (sanctioned) by her father's ancestors and male agnates of the lineage and is a precondition for her being marriageable – that is, definitely transformed into a spouse (in relation to her husband) and an affine (in relation to her husband's lineage/cognatic group). Finally, during the "wedding meal," while the girl's side offers raw female products (yams, peanuts, and especially taro), the husband's side gives the girl's side cooked male products (plantain and goat/pork meat).

I will later proceed to the analysis of marriage exchanges and how they relate to initiation in the third section, but, before doing so, I shall turn to Madagascar and examine how taboos produce Malagasy personhood.

Personhood and the Performative Nature of Taboo in Madagascar

From Negation . . .

Contrary to what holds for the self in the Cameroon Grassfields, Malagasy personhood is performed not so much through what a person does as by what he or she does not do (Graeber 1995, 265). Many Malagasy groups are characterised by what Lambek (1992, 246) labels "identification by negation" (Graeber 1995, 266; on the Tsimihety, see also Wilson 1977), and negation is most clearly articulated in the form of taboo (*fady*) (Lambek 1992, 246).⁷ *Fady* is a general term since there are various categories of taboos: some apply to individuals or groups, others to places, and so on. There is also a stark differentiation between taboos promulgated by ancestors and other categories of taboos (on the pre-eminence of *sandrana* taboos over *fady*, see Cole 2001). More than being merely a sign or a rule, a taboo is to be understood in performative terms (Lambek 1992). Taboos are produced and reproduced in a kind of dialectic

of embodiment and objectification – that is, taboos are at once objectified negative rules (proscriptions) and embodied, being a part of the lived experience of specific individuals. As Jennifer Cole (2001, 109) notes in reference to the Betsimisaraka, “taboos externalize human intention.”

... to the Creation of Trans-Generational Relations

If one considers taboos as both rules and acts, as Lambek does, it proves very useful for them to be compared with positive acts of exchange. Exchange, Lambek claims, has three functions: alliance, separation, and incorporation (or union). For him, the second and third functions are more relevant than the first for an understanding of taboo. Alliance, the first function of exchange, links parties. Exchange, the second property, distinguishes the donor from the recipient and marks the space between them. Taboos do exactly this: they differentiate between those who must observe and practice it and those who need not. But differentiation implies hierarchy; hence, taboos form a basis for hierarchical relationships (Lambek 1992, 249). Finally, exchange incorporates – the third property. To these properties, one must add the diachronic/temporal aspect of exchange as well as of taboos (Lambek 1990, 1992). In Mayotte, all of the fundamental properties listed above (taboo as lived experience, performative, separation, incorporation or union, hierarchy, and temporality) are well illustrated in the *trambungu* medicine. As Lambek notes,

trambungu medicine is applied when a couple has difficulty producing offspring or maintaining them past infancy, ... the parents, especially the mother, must observe a whole set of taboos, often for a period of several years. They must refrain from attending funerals, from eating the food served at funerals, from washing the dead, from committing adultery, from quarrelling, and the like. (Lambek 1992, 250–251)

Lambek emphasises the fact that the observance of the taboos associated with *trambungu* establishes relationships. For example, they renew the sense of identity and common purpose between the parents, and they identify the mother with the child. But most important is the relation created between the curer and the parents. It is the curer who establishes the taboos, the observance of which may last several years. It is he who lifts the taboo when procreation has been successful. But even when the cure is successful, the relationship between the curer and the parents does not cease. The curer or guarantor must be present at the child's sub-

sequent rites of passage, such as circumcision and marriage, and the parents constantly ask for his protection and he receives a portion of meat. Thus, the relation is obviously one of dependence, hence hierarchic. Moreover, people born under a condition of *trambungu* must themselves reinitiate such a condition when they wish to have children. The need for *trambungu* may be passed on bilaterally. Therefore, relationships instituted through the imposition and observance of taboos are reproduced from generation to generation. The *trambungu* medicine and the associated taboos objectify the “problematic” relation of husband-wife – as procreators – or mother-father.

Similarities and Differences

Food, (Animal) Taboos, Agency, and Efficacy

One fundamental difference between the Grassfielders and the Malagasy lies in the medium through which personhood is achieved. In the first case, the medium is (gendered) food. To understand how personhood is produced, one is constrained to “follow the food” (see marriage exchanges discussed above and birth rituals in Tsékénis 2015, 336–337): to look for who gives what (food) to whom; who cooks for whom; and who ingests what for whom. Food, as a gendered parcel of persons/groups/bodies and persons as parts of groups transform other persons/groups/bodies. Food, therefore, appears as a means that, because it is exchanged, cooked, and ingested, has the power to transform others and make them act. But precisely because the person is made to act, and both transforms, and is transformed by, being given food or being ingested by others, agency and cause (of agency) are split. In other words, the person is not the sole author of his or her acts but, rather, is also compelled to act by others therefore “revealing” him or herself and the relations of which he or she is composed.

Malagasy personhood, on the other hand, is achieved through the observance of taboos, of which the most powerful and widespread are those pertaining to animals and instituted by the ancestors. While Grassfields ritual ascribes personhood, taboos carve out a space for the self-construction of identity more than it ascribes identity per se (Lambek 1992, 260). Notwithstanding this fundamental difference, in both the Grassfields and Madagascar, the premises on which agency lies are similar since it is elicited either from other selves (in the case of the Grassfields) or from taboo(s) (in the Malagasy case) – that is, the act (or abstention) as well as its effect(s) lie outside the self, and a split is therefore introduced between the agent/self and the cause of agency (Table 1).

Table 1: Personhood and agency in the Cameroon Grassfields and Madagascar

	Medium	Cause of agency	Modality of personhood
Grassfields	(Gendered) Food	Others (selves or collectives)	Personhood by ascription
Madagascar	(Animal) Taboos	Ancestors	Personhood by negation (proscription)

What this table suggests is that Malagasy personhood is primarily proscriptive, while, by contrast, Grassfields personhood is primarily ascriptive. Malagasy personhood/identity is obviously also achieved by prescriptive means, while Grassfielders are obviously also subject to proscriptions. Let me expand on the Malagasy case.⁸

First of all, one must keep in mind that there is a positive/prescriptive aspect to taboo for its transgression calls for acts of atonement aiming at restoring the relations thus broken (see, for example, Astuti and Bloch 2015, 2, for the incest taboo among the Vezo, the Zafimaniry, and the Merina; and Walsh 2002, 458, for taboos associated with places among the Antankarana). Beyond the prescriptive side of taboos, many accounts of “ascriptive personhood” in Madagascar can be found. On the western coast, for example, Vezo-ness is a product of performance, environment, and descent (Astuti 1995a, ch. 6; 1995b). Likewise, place and performance constitute the means by which one becomes Antankarana (Walsh 2001).⁹ Another ascriptive aspect in regard to identity and personhood is food. Lambek’s (1990) essay on exchange, time, and person in Mayotte and how persons and groups are produced through the exchange and the consumption of food is the first example that comes to mind, as it bears striking similarities with the Grassfields.¹⁰ Rita Astuti’s (1993, 1995a, 111–112) study on food, identity, and gender and the way communal meals separate the living from the dead, and Bloch’s (1985) articles on eating (rice), descent, and ancestorhood among the Merina are other cases in point. The maturation (physiologic, psychological, occupational, linguistic, and spatial) of Zafimaniry persons is still another ascriptive aspect of Malagasy identity (Bloch 1992, 133–143). Spirit possession in both Mahajanga (Lambek 1998) and Mayotte (Lambek 1988a, 1988b) can be seen as yet another prescriptive means of achieving personhood. One could go on endlessly. What I am suggesting is that the opposition prescriptive (Grassfields) / proscriptive (Malagasy) is relative. It is a matter of cultural emphasis.

Temporality and the Body

While all Batié (and, indeed, Grassfielders) undergo life-cycle rituals, achieving personhood to a greater or lesser extent, each have their own (ritual) history: the age at

which one starts and how quickly one proceeds through the various stages. Thus, ceremonies can be delayed, or even skipped altogether, for any number of reasons – a relative’s inability to provide the required gift or sum of money during marriage exchanges, for example, or an ancestor’s reluctance to give the go-ahead and so on. A man or a woman can choose to either prolong/extend or shorten his or her period of widowhood depending on how close he or she felt to the departed. But the important thing is not only that a person’s history influences the rituals but also that the rituals are crucial to making known that history (Piot 1999, 101). One crucial objective of the rites is to make visible (to objectify) the numerous and successive transformations the body/person undergoes and, in so doing, to make known each participant’s history.

In much the same way that Grassfields life-cycle rituals objectify each person’s history, Malagasy taboos provide a retrospective account of a person’s moral career and objectify the link between the past and the present, the living and the dead (Lambek 1992, 254). Among the multiple examples provided by Jennifer Cole (2001, 111) to illustrate the way taboos link past to present, I selected the following one:

Parents may ... project their memories into the future by intentionally uttering a curse, which has the power to bind future descendants (see also Graeber 1995). Tathen’s grandmother, for example, explained that her family was forbidden from eating *sokoza*, a tiny bird. The bird had rescued her ancestors from bandits by screeching: it prevented the bandits from finding her ancestors hiding in the bush. Saved by the *sokoza*, one ancestor had been so moved that he ... declared that all his descendants were tabooed from eating *sokoza*. Equally frequent were the tales of how ancestors had almost died eating a particular substance and then had declared that substance taboo for his descendants.

Sandrana (and, to a lesser extent, *faly*) taboos embody the experience and desires of those born before and those who come after and inherit them. By obeying ancestral prohibitions – shaping actions to conform to ancestral demands – people honour the past as their ancestors experienced it. In so doing, they create a form of “living memory” that breaks down the distance

between themselves and the past. Taboos bring the past into the present. As a result, they link ancestors – and the past – to the successive generations up to the living persons. Among the northern Sakalava, “myth is living or lived . . . Ancestral personages are invoked in prayer, accounted for in *observance of taboos*” (Lambek 2007, 21; emphasis added).

Consisting as it does in acts of refraining from, engaging in, sharing, and withholding food, sex, and labour, the observance or transgression of taboos is first and foremost a bodily practice (Lambek 1992, 255). This practice is sustained by a Malagasy ethno-theory of taboo, for “in Mayotte ignoring taboo is immoral . . . because it consists in failing to observe the taboos surrounding the *bodies* of others” (260; emphasis added). Cole (2001, 111; emphasis added), referring to *sandrana* taboos proffered by the ancestors, writes: “As people respect the taboos imposed by the ancestors – by avoiding specific activities or refraining from eating a particular kinds of food – memories of those ancestors come to dwell in the very *bodies* of their descendants.” However, the coercive aspect of Malagasy taboos must be nuanced. Indeed, many authors have noticed that taboos are frequently transgressed. Astuti (1995a, 63–64), for example, points to the fact that the Vezo “are able to *manipulate* both customs and taboos in order to accommodate their desires and inclinations in the present.” Hence, Malagasy taboos individuate either through ascription (there are individual taboos) or by the fact that persons can (sometimes) choose not to follow them.

From Persons to Collectives

Grassfields ritual exchanges and Malagasy taboos both “collectivise” and “individuate.” In the Grassfields, persons/bodies and collectives (of different sizes) can be conceptualised as analogues of one another on different scales. This is best highlighted when one analyses the multiple exchanges of food occurring during the different stages of the life-cycle rituals and especially during marriage. Indeed, persons/bodies can be perceived as the outcome of cross-sex mediated and unmediated exchanges between parents and, in the case of marriage, of mediated exchanges between “groups” (the girls’ and the husbands’ sides, their cognatic groups) (Strathern 1988).¹¹ Husband and wife exchange their capacities for work and procreation to “cook children”: each assumes gendered activities and each completes the other either through farming, cooking, trading, building, and so on or through the marital cooking during which men provide “water” (semen) and women provide “palm oil” (blood).

The same analysis can be conducted as far as “groups” are concerned. Through marriage exchanges,

a “group” is compelled to detach a (gendered) part of itself, thus implying that it is, like persons, made up of a male and a female part. A “group” is an androgynous entity and is made to act as either a male (husband) or female (wife) in the context of marriage transactions. At each level of magnification, the same processes are at work: detachment of parts from persons, detachment of persons from “groups.” Spouses exchange parts of themselves and deliver parts of themselves (children) for one another, and cognatic groups entering a relation of affinity exchange parts of themselves in analogous ways and reciprocally reproduce one another but on a larger scale (Gell 1999, 63). If someone tried to depict the transformations of the female person/body during its ceremonial journey (birth / puberty / marriage / motherhood / widowhood), someone would perceive the occurrence of a similar pattern at different scales, thereby uncovering a fractal logic.

Figure 4 depicts the (chronological) ritual trajectory of the (female) person/body from birth to widowhood. It illustrates the different scales along which the person/body appears (and is transformed) as it is successively produced by the cross-sex unmediated exchanges of her parents (B); her feeding/fattening during puberty rites (womanhood) (B’); the marriage exchanges between relatives and between wife-givers and wife receivers (spouse) (B’); and by her feeding/fattening occurring during the seclusion period following birth (motherhood). Therefore, relations/body/person of/at the first scale (the woman’s body as produced by the cross-sex unmediated and mediated exchanges of her parents) are “encompassed” by second-scale relations/body/person (those produced by feeding during the seclusion of the puberty rite), which are themselves encompassed by third-scale relations/body/person (those produced during the exchanges and the sharing of food during marriage ceremonies), which, in turn, are encompassed by fourth-scale relations/body/person (those produced by the feeding/fattening following birth). Figure 4 is drawn in such a way as to show the similarity between the constitution of the person/self and other “social entities,” thus revealing that ritual exchange both individuates and collectivises. The diagram also points to the fractal quality of personhood and the principle governing the ritual process – namely, hierarchy.

Although the Malagasy material at hand does not allow me to clearly delineate the contours of Malagasy collectives, it does reveal, if read carefully, two fractal features of taboos. First, many authors working in different parts of Madagascar have shown that Malagasy taboos operate on multiple levels (Astuti 2000, 14; 2007, 2; Lambek 1992, 254). Indeed, there are taboos shared

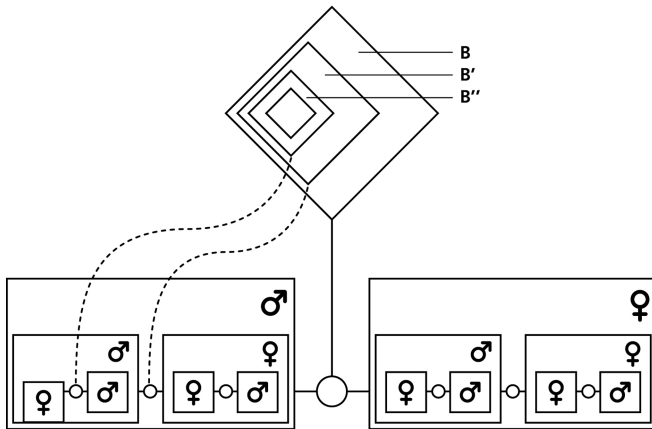


Figure 4: The fractal logic underlying the making of the female gendered person/body and the ritual process (Gell 1999, 50, 51)

by a whole locality (local taboos) (Cole 2001, 111; Walsh 2001, 2002); within this locality, descent lines are differentiated through their respective taboos, and, within a descent line, a person can choose not to follow a “lineage taboo” and, therefore, indexes – and legitimates – its “relative autonomy from his descent line” (Lambek 1992, 257). Second, as Walsh rightly reminds us, the transgression of taboos has implications not only for the transgressor (individual) but also for all of the people sharing the same environment (collective). This seems to hold especially for “land taboos” (*fady ny tany*) (Walsh 2002, 455; for a case study illustrating this point, see Walsh 2002, 460–461). Table 2 provides a list of taboos illustrating the first property of taboos and showing not only the multiple levels they define but also their hierarchical ordering, to which I shall return when considering the status of animals and persons among the Vezo.

Taboos 1–8 apply to all Vezo, taboos 9–12 are inherited from the ancestors (these are “lineage or descent lines taboos”), taboos 13–14 apply only to women, while taboos 17–19 are followed by possessed persons. As shown, each set of taboos defines a collective of a different size. Thus, taboos 1–8 define the contours of the Vezo community in opposition to other communities, which do not observe these specific taboos; taboos 9–12 delineate the contours of specific lineages or descent groups in opposition to each other within the wider community; taboos 13–14 oppose Vezo men and women in terms of gender; and, finally, taboos 17–19 individuate persons. The principle that implicitly governs these processes of differentiation is hierarchy.

Table 2: List of Vezo taboos (Astuti 2007, 2)

1. Shall neither kill nor eat dolphins
2. Shall not breed sheep nor eat lamb
3. Shall not point a finger toward a whale
4. Shall not sell tortoise meat
5. Shall not speak Merina in specific
6. Shall not throw away crab’s shell after nightfall
7. Shall not laugh while eating honey
8. Shall not have intimate relationship with a sister/brother of the opposite sex
9. Shall not eat chicken
10. Shall not eat *lovo* fish
11. Shall not domesticate lemurs
12. Shall not wash a corpse after nightfall
13. Shall not cut into pieces a living animal
14. Shall not remove hair from one’s face
15. Shall not eat a ray fish liver
16. Shall not chop down a *farafatse* tree to build a canoe
17. Shall not wear red or black clothes
18. Shall not breed pigs or eat pork
19. Shall not attend burials

To clarify, the ethnographies of Astuti (2000, 14), Cole (2001, 109ff), and Lambek (1992, 249ff) seem to suggest that there are at least two main categories of taboos: those proffered by ancestors, known as *sandrana*, and those imposed by healers, known as *fady*. This distinction seems to hold equally among the Vezo (see Astuti 2000, 15), while in the case of Mayotte the difference is between taboos imposed by royal *trumba* spirits, on the one hand, and those imposed by a healer to his client (Lambek 1992, 250). “*Sandrana* taboos” we are told, “are more powerful and hence more important to obey than *fady*” (Cole 2001, 109), while, in Mayotte, “weaker” taboos can be negotiated while “strong” ones cannot (Lambek 1992, 250). Although this is not explicit in Astuti’s listing, it seems obvious that the first cluster of taboos (1– 8) is hierarchically superior to the second one (9–12), defining as it does a collective entity – the “Vezo” – which, in turn, incorporates the descent groups or lineages. Out of the 19 taboos, 11 pertain to animals, and out of the first set of taboos, five pertain to animals (1, 2, 3, 4, and 6). That is to say, the (negative) relation to some specific animals constitute the means through which the hierarchically superior level of integration is instituted/constituted. At this higher level of integration, Vezo-ness (“Vezo humanity”) is constituted in opposition to animality.

Hence, taboos are hierarchised, and they hierarchise the multiple levels of social integration, thus instantiating collectives of variable magnitude. The form of these collectives shifts according to the hierarchical level. As with Grassfields collectives, so Malagasy social entities

are fluid and primarily defined by a single – but negative – principle: taboos. Here again, I do not mean to suggest that Malagasy collectives are defined exclusively in negative forms. A counter-example to this would be Lambek's (1990) essay mentioned above where his description and analysis of exchange, time, and person in Mayotte bear striking similarities with those found all over the Cameroon Grassfields.¹² Other counter-examples can be found in other parts of the island as well; thus, among the Vezo and the Antankarana, collective identity is a product of performance and of experience of place (Astuti 1995b; Walsh 2001, 2002), and, complementary to what Walsh (2001) labels as the "inclusive model" of Antankarana group identity, lies an "exclusive model" determined by both descent and ritual performance (the *Tsangantsainy* ritual [see 15–20]). I shall now turn to the final section of this study and see to what extent these forms of instantiation impinge upon the human-animal distinction.

Hierarchy and the Human-Animal Distinction

In Madagascar . . .

Humanity, Astuti writes, lies in the observance of taboos – that is, the respect shown to those who are considered the source of one's existence – the ancestors. Through this observance, humans establish their morality and define themselves in opposition to animals (Astuti 2000, 18). Taboos relate to the human-animal distinction because, on the higher level of integration, taboos are what distinguish the latter from the former (Astuti 2000, 5; 2007, 2). For the Vezo, being human is tantamount to sharing a moral order, a constellation of rules and practices imposed by taboos of a – so to say – superior level – for example, instituted by the ancestors, occurring in the present but linked to the past, a past that children cannot fully apprehend yet, and a present in which they cannot fully participate because of their ignorance pertaining to taboos.

One consequence of this is that the distinction between animality and humanity is not provided, a priori, fixed once and for all; it is fluid for the morality of humans is constituted through the continuous performance of taboos (Astuti 2000, 10). This distinction is further blurred because:

1. children, neighbouring communities and "strangers" are a little bit like animals;
2. dolphins and whales are a little bit like human persons (permanent condition); and

3. sea tortoises are vested with both animal and human qualities (temporary condition – in contrast to whales and dolphins, sea tortoises, while being taboo in certain contexts, can be hunted and eaten in others).

How can an animal be a living entity that stands for both "animality" in opposition to "humanity" and, to a certain degree, be embedded with a kind of "humanity" (qualities of personhood)? How can children, neighbours, and "strangers," which we perceive as fully-fledged humans, be "a little bit like animals"? And, finally, how can a sea tortoise be an animal and, at the same time, an entity vested with humanity? The author attempts to provide answers to these questions by examining the different ways Vezo adults and children relate to sea tortoises. When an adult catches a sea tortoise and leaves it unattended, children "play" with it; children, "being a little bit like animals" themselves, feel no moral constraints since they do not follow taboos and "torture" the animal. But when the owner of the tortoise (the man who caught the animal) takes it away from the children and initiates its ritual cutting up, he separates the children's amoral games from the moral realm of taboos, thus separating "the realm of the children – who are not persons yet but resemble animals" from the realm of the adults who are full persons carrying as they do, the heavy burden of taboos (Astuti 2000, 9).¹³ This separation is tantamount to the tortoise entering the realm of taboos where humans (adults) owe it respect. However, paradoxically, this respect is expressed in the strict rules the owner must follow during the cutting up – that is, the ritual killing – of the tabooed animal, which is an act that an adult, who otherwise observes taboos, would accomplish only with non-tabooed animals. In this particular instance, the tabooed animal relates to taboos in a negative way.

Vezo children share a degree of animality with (both children and adults) neighbours and "strangers." But while Vezo children gradually dispose of their animality as they grow and become fully-fledged humans (persons), thus becoming fully aware of (and performing specifically Vezo) taboos, neighbours and strangers "remain a little bit like animals" (Astuti 2000, 10). All of these inconsistencies can be explained only in part by the existence of taboos, which express a moral order, and, thus, a humanity, drawing the borderline between animals and humans (personhood).

Astuti (2000, 14) also provides a cognitive explanation for the changing relation of children and adults in reference to the animal-human borderline. She outlines the existence of three "cognitive steps" from childhood to adulthood in relation to the human-animal distinction.

The first phase (childhood) is one where children perceive differences between animals and humans. The second is one where humans and animals are equated by virtue of their being both “living machines.” Finally, the third is one where Vezo adults are fully aware of, and practice, taboos as a (social/cultural and socially/culturally acquired) means of differentiating humans (persons) from non-humans (non-persons). Equally important is the fact, stressed by the author, that humans at this level differ from animals not by virtue of language, wisdom, or thought (other socially acquired “skills”) but, rather, through the observance/performance of taboos.

However, Astuti’s ethnography allows one to further refine the analysis of the animal-human distinction and therefore gain a better understanding of the fluctuating status of animals. Indeed, the author suggests, although not in explicit terms, that according to the Vezo animals are “a little bit like humans” because some of them display a “human behaviour” (dolphins often save people from drowning and, therefore, show compassion and display intentionality). This is humanity defined primarily in terms of “feelings” and intentionality. Second, (tabooed) animals obviously do not relate to taboos in the same way as (full) humans (persons) do. In this instance, (tabooed) animals are a little bit like humans because they eventually become part of a common, higher form of humanity – for example, humanity primarily couched in social/cultural terms (universe of taboos). That is, they relate to taboos in a passive form; animals, contrary to persons, do not perform taboos (recall the profoundly performative nature of taboos). What is more, taboos are closely related to ancestorhood and therefore to the past.

Besides the different cognitive steps that explain the different attitudes of the Vezo toward animal (and animality), Astuti’s ethnography also suggests the complementary and independent existence of multiple (at least two), hierarchised kinds of “humanity” (personhood) – one could speak of “degrees of humanity.”¹⁴ The first one – the “inferior” form of humanity – refers to the aptitude of animals in expressing (human) feelings and displaying intentionality (the kind of non-verbal communication shared by humans and animals) (see Ingold 1994 [1988], 7). The second one – the “superior” form of humanity (personhood) – refers to the exclusively human aptitude to observe and perform taboos (both a verbal and non-verbal means of communication) (see Lambek 1992).¹⁵

... in the Grassfields

In the case of the Grassfields, I will examine the animal-human distinction through hunting/sacrifice and, more

specifically, through the hunting of panthers and the rituals surrounding the treatment of their corpses, as the latter was conducted in the region until the late 1940s. I will draw on the description made by Pradelles de Latour (1991, 189–192) of a hunt for a panther that took place in 1948 in the southern Grassfields polity of Bangoua.

Hunting in the Cameroon Grassfields was, and still is, an exclusively male prerogative. It bears both a symbolic and a political meaning. For one thing, the figure of the wandering hunter (the generic word for hunter is *junbv* in Batié *njôviip* in Bangoua) is primarily a political one (see Argenti 2007, 36–37; Pradelles de Latour 1991, 189, 192). Traditions of genesis in many (if not all) Grassfields polities are articulated around the theme of an originally wandering hunter who left his community of origin, encountered “autochthonous” people, and, after subjugating through violence and ruse, eventually settled up and founded the polity with them. The panther is an animal that symbolises/naturalises the grace and the power of Grassfields *fons* (chiefs).

Although the alter ego of Grassfields *fons* and notables are usually associated with awesome predators, every human being is supposed to have an animal alter ego (*jiè*) living in the forest. This relationship is so intimate that it is believed that the death (or injury) of the animal alter ego causes the death (or injury) of its human counterpart and vice-versa.¹⁶ In the case of the Grassfields, therefore, humans and animals relate to each other through identification. When a panther was killed by hunters,

a “medicine man” (*nggankang*) covered its head with water lily leaves to prevent villagers from recognizing its human counterpart – which would have been fatal to him. If a man ever faced its animal alter ego he would succumb instantly. The hunters who had killed the animal attached its paws and transported it – hanging from a pole to the palace singing:

“Panther, you were not killed in vain; we lapidated you in order to save our children and goats. Leave now and go blind your brothers so that they fall in our traps” ...

The hunters dropped off the animal at the chief’s feet, who was sitting on his throne, at *ndepship* (a place covered with vegetation which is like a “forest” inside the palace) and he offered them a goat which they slaughtered with machetes. The chief’s servant released the feline’s paws and hung it by the neck to the branch of a cola tree called “the panther’s tree” which still stands today at the centre of the palace’s main aisle. He then hooked heavy rocks to its paws and tail so as to stretch its skin. The hunters for

their part, sat under the cola tree and baked some plantains bananas and the goat's meat under the ashes, and ate them with no sauce. They sang, each one in turn, some melodies with no lyrics to stay awake all night long. It is believed that if no such precautions were taken the panthers of the forest would have come to take away the body of their dead peer and devour the hunters.

By sunset the next morning, the chief's servant and the *nggankang* unhooked the animal from the cola tree and laid it down on banana plantain leaves in front of the "panther's hut" ... The chief covered his hands with ashes and tore the feline's mustache, wrapped it carefully into a leaf and hid it under his belt ... The chief's servant and the *nggankang* chopped up the animal's corpse, offered its skin to the chief and dragged the feline's corpse to a rock overlooking the palace. There, they pierced the leaves and the abdomen with an antelope horn nine times so as to free the animal's human *jiè*. The two men brought back the feline's corpse, eviscerated it, buried the intestines and the skull inside the "panther's ossuary," cut the meat into pieces which the chief distributed to the chiefdom's high ranked notables, keeping the heart and liver for himself.

The hunters had to undergo a cleansing ritual called "remove the evil caused by the panther" before returning to their home. The chief's servant shaved their head and offered them yams cooked with special herbs pronouncing: "We eat this food in order to remove the evil things that this panther brought with her." In the past, a similar ritual called "cooking the herbs of war" was performed when a warrior had killed an enemy. A ritual dance followed, similar to the one once honouring the warriors which had bought their enemy's head from battle. (Pradelles de Latour 1991, 190–191)

I shall endorse Pradelles de Latour's analysis of the ritual handling of the panther's death (killed in hunting) but, at the same time, focus on the way it relates to the human-animal relation. The author distinguishes three ritual stages. During the first one the feline, being half human and half animal, bears the ambiguous identity of a witch. The hunters subjugate themselves to the constraints of life in the wild, thus deceiving the animal – they do not cut the goat's throat as usual, they eat food cooked in ashes and not boiled, they do not sleep but stay awake singing wordless melodies attuned to the nocturnal cries of wild animals. On the second day, the removal of the moustache, the skin, and the *jiè* separate the feline's human parts from its animal part – the latter being reduced to mere comestible game. The hunters need no longer fear the mirroring effects of the feline's view. The final stage of the ritual consists in cleansing

the lasting "bad things" to which the hunters are still exposed, while the dance sanctifies the bravery of the hunters and the glory of the chief.

Because the main interest of Pradelles de Latour is to underline the fundamental difference between the person of the *fon* and the citizens of the polity through their respective relationship to the feline, he understates the eminently "human treatment" of the animal's corpse. Indeed, most of the ritual energy is devoted to the burying (at least of those parts that are considered human – the skull and the intestines) and the mourning of the animal. The hunters have their heads shaved, exactly like mourners do at a person's death. Second, they are subjected to food and sexual restrictions (they eat plantains cooked in ashes and cannot have sexual intercourse), exactly like widows and widowers when they mourn for their dead husbands/spouses.¹⁷ Finally, the hunters share a ceremonial meal made with yams mixed with special herbs, and we are told that in the past warriors who had killed an enemy were subjected to a similar ritual called "the cooking of the herbs of war." In all of these instances, the death of the animal is clearly equated with the death of a human being, strongly suggesting that the animal is vested with attributes of personhood.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this study has been to argue for the comparative method as a means to understanding both the ways in which personhood and collectives are produced in two different ethnographic settings and the degree to which this impinges upon the human-animal distinction. I shall argue that the comparative exercise has met these expectations. As far as personhood is concerned, a fundamental difference is that, in the case of Madagascar, it is expressed and lived in negative terms. Indeed, people are primarily defined through what they are restricted from doing. In the case of the Cameroon Grassfields, on the other hand, personhood is achieved to a large extent through ascriptive processes. This is not to say, of course, that there are no ascriptive aspects in Malagasy perceptions and practices of personhood or that Grassfields personhood is totally devoid of proscriptive aspects. I am merely suggesting that there is a different cultural emphasis in each case. The similarities, on the other hand, are equally fundamental. In both cases, for example, there seems to be a split between agents and the cause of agency for the latter is external to the agent. In the Grassfields, agency lies to a great extent in other selves, while Malagasy (negative) agency lies in taboos that are promulgated by ancestors. Second, both Grassfields agency, which takes the form

of a gendered exchange, and Malagasy taboos, which do not seem to rely on a single principle, operate at different hierarchised scales, thus creating multiple social entities.¹⁸

The ways in which personhood and collectives are instantiated give a specific twist to the human-animal distinction. In the Grassfields, the human-animal relationship is couched in terms of identification – one could say, consubstantiality – as the ritual treatment of the (“human”) parts of the feline suggests. In Madagascar, on the other hand, the human-animal relationship, like personhood and social entities, materialises by means of negation (taboos). This is further proof of Tim Ingold’s (1994 [1988], 9) insight that to understand “animality” one must also examine personhood, each being, of course, the pole of a conceptual whole.¹⁹ However, and despite these differences, the animal’s attributes of personhood (their humanity, if you will) emerge in both cases when they enter, what we could label, the “ritual realm” (in the Malagasy instance, this takes the form of taboos; in the case of the Grassfields, of death rituals). Thus, among the Vezo, the sea tortoise is shown respect once it is separated from the children’s amoral realm and brought by its “owner” into the moral universe of taboos, while, in the case of the Grassfields, the hunters separate the human parts of the panther and subsequently perform the rituals ordinarily devoted to a human being (a person). In both cases, the human-animal distinction is blurred.

Another common principle in both the instantiations of personhood, collectives, and the nature of the animal-human relationship is hierarchy. As we saw concerning the Vezo, it is difficult to argue for an absolute distinction between animality and humanity, not only because the distinction is maintained through the continuous observance/performance of taboos but also because there seems to be various “degrees of humanity.” By the same token that humanity – personhood – can be ascribed to animals, so too can humans – persons – display beastly behaviour. Humanity therefore, like animality, is neither a natural nor a homogeneous state of being. This article has provided some further insights, which, I hope, will contribute to our reflection upon this relationship.

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Notes

- 1 Of course, Malagasy personhood is not construed exclusively in negative modes. I introduce some ambiguities on this topic in the following sections.
- 2 On both the homogeneity and the heterogeneity of the Cameroon Grassfields, see Argenti 2007; Fowler and Zeitlyn 1996; Geary 1981; Kopytoff 1981; Tsékénis 2010a, 2010b; Warnier 1985. I have outlined the general aspects of what I call “Grassfields personhood” in a recent paper (Tsékénis 2015).
- 3 Despite the significant differences between the Malagasy communities under comparison with regard to their livelihoods, their relation to the state, their kinship systems, and so on, in this article, I draw on ethnographic evidence that is equally valid across the ethnographies under comparison. If terms like “Malagasy” and “Madagascar” seem to refer to homogeneous entities, it is only with regard to the concept of taboo.
- 4 Needless to say that what is being compared is not “the Vezo,” “the Antankarana,” and so on but, rather, Astuti’s or Walsh’s representations of “the Vezo” and “the Antankarana.” The “Batié” or “the Cameroon Grassfields” are my own fictions that, moreover, build on previous fictions.
- 5 For a full description and analysis of Grassfields life-cycle rituals, see Tsékénis 2015.
- 6 For a detailed description of marriage ceremonies, see Tsékénis 2000, 75–83.
- 7 In his account of Arivonimamo Graeber writes characteristically: “By all accounts, ... curses always took a *negative* form: ‘you will never have any children’; ‘you will never find prosperity in your life’; or ‘you will never enter the family tomb’” (Graeber 1995, 266; emphasis added).
- 8 On the complexities of Grassfields personhood and how it relates to ritual, food, and gender, see Tsékénis 2015; for a brief outline of the historical context in which Grassfields personhood unfolds as well as how it relates to witchcraft, see Tsékénis 2016.
- 9 On the importance of becoming over being in Africa in general, see Comaroff and Comaroff 2001.
- 10 I will elaborate on Lambek’s essay in a subsequent section (see also note 12 below).
- 11 By mediated exchange, Strathern, following the Maussian definition of gift exchange, means all kind of objects/items that, as parts of persons, can be detached and exchanged between partners and, therefore, can mediate their relations (Mauss 1990 [1925]). In unmediated exchange, persons do not detach parts of themselves but, rather, affect each other directly: the work that spouses do for one another or the capability of a mother to grow a child inside her are examples of such exchanges (Strathern 1988, 178–179).
- 12 There, the author shows how the “*shunggu* ceremonial exchange system defines the relations of persons to the social whole and to each other” (Lambek 1990, 647) by means of food exchange and consumption, producing persons and

- collectives (age groups and villages); how scale shifts from individuals to age groups and from there to villages (652, 654); and, finally, how “age groups are embedded in ... a *totalizing hierarchical system*” (657; emphasis added).
- 13 This is exemplified in the way the owner of the tortoise drives out the children from the animal and in the way he distributes parts of the tortoise to them, almost throwing them as if the children were animals.
 - 14 Likewise, Willerslev (2007, 114), in examining the human-animal relations among the Siberian Yukaghirs, speaks of “a difference in degrees.” Nadasdy (2007, 31; emphasis added), for his part, notices that the Kluane hunters do not distinguish humans from animals in absolute terms and conceive of animals (of different species in which they include the human species) as “different *kinds of people*.”
 - 15 Of course, as Ingold (1994 [1988], 13; emphasis added) rightly argues, an animal “fits the world to itself, by *ascribing functional meanings* to the objects it encounters, and thereby integrating them into a coherent system of its own.” As Gibson aptly puts it, different animals can live in a shared environment, and can *share their perceptions* of what it affords (cited in Ingold 1994 [1988], 13; emphasis added).
 - 16 Witchcraft beliefs rely heavily on this supposed relationship, although it is believed that many persons are not aware of this identification. Thus, when an owl, the alter ego of the witch, which is associated with vampirism, is injured, its human counterpart (the witch) is also injured.
 - 17 For a full description of mourning and the rituals following death, see Tsékénis 2015, 337. Restrictions mainly focus on food and sex because conception, birth, and nurture are conceived as cooking processes (see Feldman-Savelsberg 1995; Pradelles de Latour 1991; Tsékénis 2015).
 - 18 Echoes here of Kohn’s “semiotic hierarchy” (Kohn 2013, 170, ch. 5).
 - 19 For an illustration of person-animal relations, see Ingold 2000, ch. 3, 6, 8; Kohn 2013, 114–115, 118–119, 142–148; Nadasdy 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 476; Willerslev 2007, ch. 4, 5.

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