



Siméon Rajaona on Western ways of thinking and the authentic Malagasy mind

Graziella Masindrazana, Zoly Rakotoniera & Casey Woodling

To cite this article: Graziella Masindrazana, Zoly Rakotoniera & Casey Woodling (2018) Siméon Rajaona on Western ways of thinking and the authentic Malagasy mind, South African Journal of Philosophy, 37:3, 347-360, DOI: [10.1080/02580136.2018.1514244](https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2018.1514244)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2018.1514244>



Published online: 18 Sep 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Siméon Rajaona on Western ways of thinking and the authentic Malagasy mind¹

Graziella Masindrazana¹, Zoly Rakotoniera¹ and Casey Woodling^{2,*} 

¹Department of Anglophone Studies, University of Antananarivo, Antananarivo, Madagascar

²Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Coastal Carolina University, Conway, South Carolina, USA

*Corresponding author email: caseywoodling@gmail.com

In two papers early in his career, Siméon Rajaona – one of Madagascar’s most famous intellectuals – argues that Westerners have tended to distort the Malagasy worldview by interpolating Western notions into their understanding of it. As a result, the authentic characteristics of the Malagasy mind have been missed by many in the West. He claims that when compared to Westerners, Malagasy have a distinct notion of truth, a different style of reasoning, a different conceptual connection with the world, and a distinct ethical system. His work on this topic is pioneering and insightful. We think that Rajaona is correct on some points but that others are overestimated. In the essay, we explain his work and raise challenges for most of his claims and express agreement with him in parts. While we express scepticism about his claims involving truth, reasoning, and conceptual connection, we agree with him that there is a distinctive Malagasy ethics, though it has analogues in the West. At the end of the paper, we sketch what we take to be distinct elements in the Malagasy worldview relative to Rajaona’s claims.

Introduction

In two papers early in his career, Siméon Rajaona (1959; 1963), one of Madagascar’s most famous intellectuals, argues that there are Malagasy ways of thinking and aspects of the authentic Malagasy worldview that are radically distinct from Western ways of thinking and from the Western worldview. His overarching concern is with previous outsider attempts to understand the Malagasy mind. In his view, these attempts interpolate Western notions into the Malagasy mind that were simply not there and thereby erase the most distinctive and authentic elements of Malagasy thought. Outsiders have got it factually wrong in their attempts to describe Malagasy thought due to a propensity to read their own concepts into the minds of Malagasy. These scholars also, according to Rajaona, engaged in what might be called cultural imperialism or ethnocentrism. He explains a tendency of Western scholars to view indigenous cultures from the outside as primitive simply in virtue of being non-Western, and moreover to see different forms of thought on a hierarchical scale – always with Western thought as the pinnacle, as the most mature and complete version of human thought.

Rajaona identifies some main elements of Malagasy thought that have not been fully appreciated by Western scholars, according to him. The following, then, can be considered as a list of corrections to the general treatment that the Malagasy worldview receives in the West:

1. There is a distinctive notion of truth in the Malagasy worldview that has been missed by Western analysis;
2. Malagasy do not reason in the same way as Westerners;

¹ The third author listed wishes to thank the Fulbright Program for supporting this research. We would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for helpful and stimulating commentary on the paper.

3. Malagasy enjoy a direct connection with the external world, that is, their mental connection with the world is not mediated by conceptual categories as is the case with Westerners; and
4. Malagasy ethics is distinct from Western ethics.

To the extent that Rajaona's ideas have been discussed by scholars, there seems to be more or less wholesale agreement with his conclusions, though not much discussion of the arguments themselves. For example, Lee Haring (1992) and Øyvind Dahl (1999) – in their truly excellent work on Madagascar – seem to accept Rajaona's arguments wholesale without much commentary on his reasoning. We engage with Rajaona's arguments more fully than previous authors, and find reason to doubt his case for (1), (2), and (3). As for (4), we agree with much of what he says about Malagasy ethics; however, our main concern with (4) is with his rather narrow characterisation of Western ethics. So, we agree that there is a distinctive Malagasy way of approaching ethical issues and distinctive ways of viewing right and wrong in the Malagasy worldview, but these ways do have Western analogues.

We do not think that the Malagasy worldview is the mirror image of the Western worldview. In fact, we note real differences between the two in what follows. Rajaona's perceptive analysis is often illuminating, but in general he overestimates the differences between the Western and Malagasy worldviews. His work, though, is remarkable and important; the topic had not been addressed before his treatment of it, and it also provides a good caution against ethnocentrism. We discuss in detail Rajaona's arguments in the next four sections, which are organised around the four claims above. In the last section, we sketch out the plausible differences between his view and ours as far as the four claims are concerned.

Rajaona was surely right to oppose the idea that the Western worldview is the culmination of human thought. In the end, the points at which the Malagasy worldview mirrors the Western worldview are arguably universal points, that is, elements shared by all human societies with significant enough populations and organisational sophistication. These seem not to be pinnacles but unavoidable roots. So, in the end, we argue that there are elements of the worldviews under discussion that are likely universal – not distinctively Western or Malagasy – and characteristics of the Malagasy worldview that are authentically Malagasy (though perhaps not unique in human history) that differ from characteristics in the Western worldview.

We should note that although we are critical of Rajaona's work, there is also a great deal to admire. It should also be noted that his early philosophical essays appear to occur more or less in intellectual isolation. There was no great tradition of written work or scholarship on Malagasy philosophy to which he was responding. This reason, coupled with the true depth and sophistication of his thinking, make his work on this topic all the more remarkable.

Before we talk about the details of Rajaona's arguments, a final note is in order about the very idea of a worldview and, more specifically, the idea of *the* Western worldview and *the* Malagasy worldview. First, a note about worldviews in general. Worldviews should be understood as abstract types. They are sets of beliefs and concepts that abstract away from individual minds. There are certain patterns in ways of thinking that allow us to abstract away from groups of individuals and talk about general properties that are shared by their particular ways of thought. We want to stress that there is still much individual variation in the thought of both Westerns and Malagasy. The variation happens at the level of tokens, while our discussion is pitched at the level of types. Take, for example, the famous Malagasy concept *FIHAVANANA*.² As we explain later in the paper, this is a normative concept in Malagasy thought that is often translated as *kinship* in English, though that translation hardly captures the richness of the concept. It is a state of peace or harmony that people can achieve with others in community. It is modelled on the peace, harmony, love, respect, and closeness that is often seen in family ties. One hears slightly different articulations of what individuals take *fihavanana* to be, indicating that there is variation of token concepts at the individual level (individual's concepts) that are still similar enough to be members of the same type

2 We use SMALL CAPS to denote concepts in this paper.

(abstract concept). When we talk about the concept *FIHAVANANA* in the paper, then, we are talking about it as abstract type. Likewise, our discussion of worldview tracks types and not tokens of these types. Not all people think the same, but there is sufficient similarity in forms of thought that warrants discussion and comparison of those forms as types.

Like talk of worldview in general, talk of *the* Malagasy worldview or *the* Western worldview might be met with scepticism. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro raises this scepticism about his own work on Amerindian thought.

By applying the labels “perspectivism” or “multinaturalism” to “Amerindian cosmologies” and contrasting it to a “Western cosmology”, I am bound to be accused of two complementary faults (among others). It might be said that I am over-differentiating these two poles, and perhaps even essentializing them, that is, of proposing yet another Great Divide theory, and that I am under-differentiating each of them internally – the Amerindian one by treating, say, the Kayapó and the Tsimshian as birds of a feather who flocked together just yesterday from Siberia, and the Western one by lumping under this label an ungodly bricolage of histories, languages, cultures, intellectual traditions, discursive practices, genres, and what have you (Viveiros de Castro 2015, 210).

In a similar spirit, someone might wonder how the Malagasy worldview and the Western worldview can be treated as monolithic when they each contain so much diversity. In the case of Malagasy thought, many recognise 22 distinct cultural groups, sometimes called ethnic groups, that are distinguished by their cultural traditions and geographic location. Of course, Western thought spans a great many countries, languages, and epochs, as Viveiros de Castro rightly points out. Does the diversity of Malagasy and Western thought not mean that terms like “the Malagasy worldview” and “the Western worldview” lack a genuine referent? These are good worries to have, and we should bear this diversity in mind when we hear such phrases. We can use the distinction between worldviews as types and tokens to help ease this concern, though. Essentially, we are talking about the Malagasy worldview and Western worldview at a very general level and that is what justifies the use of the terms. There are more specific types of worldviews that fall under the Malagasy worldview, which arguably attach to the various cultural groups in Madagascar. So, there is arguably a Betsileo worldview, an Antandroy worldview, an Antankarana worldview, and so on. These worldviews actually share a great many similarities with the overarching Malagasy worldview. There is certainly enough similarity in these worldviews to classify them all as more particular versions of the Malagasy worldview. The same can be said for the Western worldview. Last, at an individual level, individuals may instantiate features or aspects of various types of worldviews as well. While keeping in mind the great diversity within worldviews, we also adopt Viveiros de Castro’s response to this scepticism. He writes, “I have to say in my defence that the decision to concentrate on some similarities internal to (but not exclusive to) the Amerindian domain and on an overall contrast with the modern West is mostly a question of choice of level of generality” (Viveiros de Castro 2015, 212). Because we are focused on very general features, such as the concept *TRUTH* and styles of reasoning, comparing the very general worldviews is warranted. With another goal in mind, such as examining whether the notion of kinship is truly the same across all Malagasy cultural groups, we would be at a less general level. Additionally, we also follow Rajaona himself in contrasting the two different, very general worldviews. Because our discussion is at a very general level, talk of *the* Western worldview and *the* Malagasy worldview is warranted.

The Malagasy notion of truth is distinct

Rajaona says that Western scholars misunderstand the Malagasy concept *TRUTH*. This idea about truth has significant ramifications for the rest of the Malagasy worldview since the concept *TRUTH* is a fundamental one, that is, one on which other more complex concepts rest. If this fundamental notion were indeed distinct in the Malagasy worldview, then it would seem that much else would be distinct as well.³ Get the concept *TRUTH* wrong, in other words, and you stand to get much else

3 We use the terms “concept” and “notion” interchangeably in the paper.

wrong as well. Rajaona's main concern about truth is that it is misleading to translate the Malagasy word "marina" as *true* or *vrai*. His reasoning here is quite subtle, so we do our best to reconstruct it as carefully as we can. He focuses on this idea most thoroughly in "Essai d'analyse de la structure de la pensée malgache, examen de quelques notions" (1959). The best method, according to Rajaona, for discovering the authentic Malagasy notion of truth is to studying the Malagasy language itself and some of its classic uses, such as *ohabolana* (Malagasy proverbs).⁴ "Marina" and its cognates all contain some notion of balance, of a levelling between two extremes. "Ariana", the root, means *level*. "Miarina", an active verb, means *to erect*. "Manarina", a causative verb, means *to make level*. So, it is a mistake to translate "marina" using the English word "true" because "true" does not have this connotation of balance. This method of argumentation is interesting. It is a careful examination of the meanings of "marina" by examining its cognates, and this does seem to be a method to reveal the intricacies of meaning. It is our view, however, that these intricacies are not involved in the shared concept TRUTH for Malagasy, as we argue below.

First, let us discuss how Rajaona sees the Western concept TRUTH. He says that it contains the concept CORRESPONDENCE and is often understood by philosophers in terms of intrinsic properties. Such properties are generally taken to have natures that do not depend on the environment outside of the individual who has the properties, whereas extrinsic properties require the environment outside of individual to be a certain way. Being married, for example, is an extrinsic property since it requires the existence of a spouse outside of the person who has the property of being married. Let us talk about what it means to understand truth in terms of correspondence. The idea here is that the Western concept contains the idea that truth is a relation between two things, one of which is the world and the other is something that represents the world, such as a thought or a substitute for thought such as a bit of language. Of course, Rajaona is right that this particular concept TRUTH has been accepted by many Western philosophers. It should be noted, though, that there have been many other notions of truth accepted by Western philosophers. There are coherence theories of truth, pragmatic theories of truth, and deflationist theories of truth, in addition to all of the various iterations of not just these theories but correspondence theories as well. There is no philosophical consensus in the West about the nature of truth, so Rajaona's idea that Western thinking adopts the correspondence theory, in the end, misses much of the subtleties of the debates that preceded (as well as antedated) his writing. He then augments this notion with the idea that truth is defined by its internal properties. He cites Descartes ([1641] 1998) here as an example, a philosopher clearly in the Western tradition, who held that clarity and distinctness is a mark of truth. In contrast to the Western notion that he describes, Rajaona says that the Malagasy concept TRUTH must be understood in terms of extrinsic properties. So, something cannot be understood as true, for Malagasy, unless we understand how it relates to the world. One serious worry here is that Rajaona may have attributed to Westerners an incoherent notion of truth. In what sense can the correspondence theory of truth, which must consider the relationship between a representation and the world, also hold that truth is an intrinsic property? To put it bluntly, correspondence would seem to involve extrinsic properties, at least on the face of things, and not merely intrinsic properties. There is a serious worry here.

4 Rajaona and other Malagasy philosophers such as Antoine de Padoue Rahajarizafy ([1953] 2004) and Ariana Ratiarivelo (2008) often cite *ohabolana* to support claims about Malagasy philosophy or the Malagasy worldview. We follow in this practice. A quick justification for it is as follows. Malagasy, both scholars and non-scholars, frequently cite proverbs to support claims about aspects of the Malagasy worldview. They seem to therefore think that the proverbs reveal something about the worldview. It is their worldview, after all, so this shows that the proverbs are good evidence for the worldview. J. A. Houlder of the London Missionary Society produced perhaps the most comprehensive collection of Malagasy proverbs (Houlder 1915). We use our own translations of the proverbs, but Houlder's work is an excellent source for study. It must be noted that there are proverbs unique to each of Madagascar's distinct ethnic or cultural groups. The proverbs cited here in this work are recognised by all Malagasy. In general, proverbs are widely known by Malagasy and used frequently in speech. They are particularly useful when it comes to convincing others of a point. They carry the wisdom of the ancestors and are given considerable authority in serious matters. There are 22 recognised ethnic groups in Madagascar (Antaifasy, Antaimoro, Antaisaka, Antakarana, Antambahoaka, Antandroy, Antanosy, Bara, Betsileo, Betsimisaraka, Bezanozano, Mahafaly, Makoa, Merina, Mikea, St. Marians, Sakalava, Sihanaka, Tanala, Tsimihety, Vezo [sub-groups of Vezo: Masikoro, Tagnalagna], and Zafimaniry), though there is of course some controversy over such categorisation. In fact, the encyclopedia *Rakibolana Rakipahalalana* (2005) published by the Akademia Malagasy notes that it was the French colonisers who divided Madagascar into 18 ethnic groups.

It must be admitted that Rajaona has a rather idiosyncratic understanding of the Western concept TRUTH that results from running together the correspondence theory of truth with an epistemic principle, a principle that is both essentially rationalistic and common throughout the Western tradition. This epistemic principle holds that understanding a proposition with clarity and distinctness is a sign that the proposition is true. Rajaona is right that whether an idea is clear and distinct to a thinker is arguably an internal relation between subjects and their own thoughts. However, this epistemic principle is distinct from the concept TRUTH. The epistemic principle is about knowledge and not truth itself. Granted, truth and knowledge are connected conceptually, but it is important to keep these ideas separate in many instances of analysis. This is one such example. Those who adopt the correspondence theory need not adopt the rationalist principle that an idea or thought being clear to a thinker is a sign that it is true. These ideas are not a package deal. In short, the concept TRUTH that Rajaona attributes to the Western worldview is not the only possible philosophical notion of truth, and it should also be kept distinct from epistemic principles. So, in a strict sense, his criticism fails because it commits the straw man fallacy.

Even if his target is problematic, we can still press on and examine whether he is right about whether the Malagasy concept TRUTH is distinct from the concept TRUTH at the heart of the correspondence theory, since this theory is accepted – with different modifications – by many in the West. Showing that the Malagasy concept TRUTH is distinct from the concept TRUTH at the heart of the correspondence theory would still be a significant insight. Is the Malagasy concept MARINA one merely of balance or a levelling between two extremes and truly distinct from the notion of truth as correspondence?⁵ As we discussed, Rajaona’s case for this largely involves a linguistic analysis of “marina”, its root, and various terms built from this root. Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that all these senses carry some connotation of balance. Does this show that the Malagasy concept MARINA is distinct? It seems not to. There are different ways to articulate the notion of something being true or accurate. One way to do this is to talk about what is not accurate. To say that one man is shorter than a second man but taller than a third man is to say something true about his height in reference to heights that are not his. This does not mean that the notion of truth at work in such a comparison is somehow fundamentally distinct from the correspondence theory. So, the idea of balance in “marina” and words built from it does not make the notion of truth expressed by “marina” distinct from the notion of truth as correspondence without further reasons.

Perhaps more importantly, we must agree that a deep semantic analysis based on etymology is going to create a much more detailed concept or meaning than the basic shared concept that a term expresses in a language community. All terms have etymologies, but these etymologies are not always expressed in the shared concept that the term expresses in its language community. Take for example, the Old English words for truth, “trīewth” and “trēowth”, which mean *faithfulness* or *constancy*. When someone asserts in English, “Springfield is the capital of Illinois”, the thought behind this assertion involves the concept TRUTH, but it does not involve the concept FAITHFUL or the concept CONSISTENT. It is not as if the assertion says that Springfield is faithful to Illinois.⁶ The general point is that arguments which read the etymology of a word into the shared concept that the word expresses in a community move too quickly since there are a great many cases where the details of the etymology of a term are simply not in the shared concept associated with some term. If such inferences were warranted, then we could conclude the concept TRUTH in English always contains the ideas of faithfulness and constancy, which obviously does not. In short, Rajaona’s method here would allow us to read too much information into the shared concept TRUTH in many distinct language communities.

There may indeed be exceptions to the rule that the etymology of a term is not contained in the shared concept expressed by that term in a community, but the majority of cases are ones in which the details of the etymology are missing from the concept as it is shared by individuals in

5 At times we refer to the Malagasy concept MARINA. In the end, our view is that it is identical to the Western concept TRUTH.

6 Of course, in other occurrences, “true” does have this connotation, such as the sentence, “He is true to his friends.” So, “true” is ambiguous like many other words. There may be some etymological connection between these senses of “true”; however, neither the ambiguity of “true” nor the etymological connection between these different senses affects the main point here: etymology does not typically factor into the shared concepts associated with terms.

a community. So, without some additional argumentation, we should hold that the same concept TRUTH is at work in both the general Malagasy and Western worldviews. In the case of English and Malagasy, “true” and “marina” express the same concept, which is narrower than the details included in their respective etymological histories. At the most basic level, it is the notion deployed in all societies when people agree that an interlocuter gets something right in conversation such as a name or a date or a great many other things.

Of course, we should note that the concept TRUTH itself could be the same in each of the respective worldviews while there are distinct attitudes about *the social acceptability of the expression of truth* in the respective worldviews. Beliefs about the social acceptability of the expression of truth can change while the basic concept TRUTH is still shared. In short, the nature of truth can be tacitly agreed upon even if people differ about how it ought to be achieved and disseminated. Just as we can peel apart epistemology from truth in the points above, we can here as well distinguish the concept TRUTH from social norms about how truth ought to be expressed. The concept TRUTH is one thing and the attitude about how it should be expressed is another, and we should not run these two things together. Consider the following passage from Dahl that concerns attitudes to truth in Madagascar: “The truth in Malagasy is therefore an attitude of social harmony. Speakers will try to harmonize their opinion with those of their listeners, to level the “ups” and “downs” (Dahl 1999, 127). This can be understood two ways. First, it can be understood as referencing the concept TRUTH or as referencing certain social norms about expressing one’s opinion. Understood in the first way it gives the idea that truth is something that most people think is true, which is a deeply mistaken way to think of the truth and surely not the real concept TRUTH in the Malagasy worldview. Understood in the second way, it is certainly true. It is true that Malagasy people have a tendency to seek a harmonious opinion.⁷ Dahl summarises this idea nicely.

According to traditional Malagasy ideals, one must strive to find intermediate positions – “not dry, not wet” [*tsy main’tsy lena*] – that everyone is ready to accept. This may take hours of discussion, during which different arguments often are illustrated by metaphors. But when agreement is finally reached, the collective decision makers are bound by the decision. The concern for harmony, for eliminating the “ups” and “downs” – the levelling mechanism – is paramount. The Malagasy “levelling procedure” is very different in feeling from the practice more common among Westerners: to voice the differences, to “agree to disagree”, or agree to allow a majority vote to settle a discussion and make a decision. In the Malagasy setting, the simple majority vote is only accepted in large meetings and only once the subject has been discussed openly so that different points of view have been exposed (*ibid.*, 145).

In sum, Malagasy people need to integrate all the possibilities when making a collective decision, as one cannot find equilibrium by ignoring the different elements and possibilities of a situation. It should also be noted that the concept TSINY plays a role here in the desire to reach consensus in major decisions. *Tsiny* is a force that one wants to avoid; it is blame or reproach that attaches to one for bad deeds. If one does not correctly interpret the truth in a given situation, one may incur *tsiny*. As many commentators have noted, TSINY is a major concept in the Malagasy worldview.⁸ The weight of *tsiny* on the minds of Malagasy is surely part of the explanation for the desire to reach a group consensus. Elinor Ochs (1974, 130) sums this up well in describing speech norms in the Vakinankaratra region:

The hesitation to commit oneself explicitly to an idea or opinion is itself an important behavioural norm in this community. One is noncommittal for fear that an action openly advocated might have consequences that would have to be borne alone. One avoids accusation because one does not wish to be responsible for providing that information. If the wrongdoer is to be pointed out, the rest of the community must share the responsibility for the act, and they must share any guilt that may result.

7 The Malagasy phrase that captures this search for harmonious opinion is *marimaritra iraisana*.

8 See Andriamanjato (1957) for more on the role of *tsiny* and *tody* in Malagasy thought.

There is a desire to avoid being the sole person responsible for a decision that turns out to have a bad result, for that would incur *tsiny*.⁹ If the decision is reached by consensus, then there is no single person on whom the *tsiny* can fall. Here is another example from Edward Keenan and Elinor Ochs that points out that responsibility is often shared across individuals in a Malagasy community. In this case, the example involves preparing for a funeral:

Women from many different households, whether of the deceased’s family or not, will help in cooking the food for those who attend and will help out in other ways. A dozen men might easily contribute their effort to construct a coffin for the deceased. We once saw six different men participate in turn and sometimes jointly in the sawing of a *single* board for a coffin! Should it turn out upon the transferal of the body to the family tomb a year or two later that the coffin was not well constructed, no one individual would be to blame (Keenan and Ochs 1979, 143).¹⁰

If responsibility is distributed evenly, then no one person stands to be at fault and all parties can better avoid blame. In situations where a collective decision is being reached, it should be stressed that Malagasy may accept a decision that they do not personally believe is completely best. They may let things pass that they do not believe to be true in the interest of group harmony or in the interest of the majority. This is further evidence that the social acceptability of the expression of truth differs from the concept TRUTH itself.

The social norms regarding truth are not the same in the West as in Madagascar, neither in philosophical tradition nor in everyday life. For starters, in the West there is a philosophical tradition of individual thinkers achieving truth on their own, merely by thinking deeply, arranging their thoughts properly, and making sound logical inferences. There is perhaps no better example of this than Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* ([1641] 1998). And the Western ideal is to make one’s ideas clear and to pursue to truth, without regard to social conformity. Dahl aptly summarises the contrast: “Anglo-Americans accept differences of opinion and do not need to harmonize them. In Madagascar the truth has to do with social relations in the greater community” (Dahl 1999, 128).

In an everyday context, there is an interest in the West on hearing different opinions on a subject, but the process of hearing contrasting opinions is not nearly as exhaustive a process as in Malagasy culture. There is no need to reach consensus either in many Western contexts. It is fine if what is perceived as the best idea wins out even if there are strong detractors.

All of this is to say that social norms about coming to a collective agreement about what to do and how to express individual ideas are distinct in Madagascar and many Western cultures. As far as the attitude for attaining truth, the Malagasy worldview expresses intellectual humility. There is a Malagasy proverb that means *justice is thin, so it’s difficult to find*. It is used to express the idea that justice is often elusive.¹¹ Even if it is difficult to find, there is also a cultural belief that the truth will come out in the end. There is a Malagasy proverb which means *the truth doesn’t die* and is used to express the idea that the truth wins in the end.¹² One sees similar attitudes expressed in the West. Truth may not be easy to come by, but it does seem to prevail in the end. The two proverbs above capture the Malagasy sentiment that the truth is difficult to find and also that it will eventually come to light. So, there appears to be convergence here in Western and Malagasy attitudes about the attainability of truth, while we do see divergences in the norms about expressing truth and coming to agreement.

9 No doubt there are also elements of this in the West. Our point is that this desire to avoid *tsiny* is much more prevalent in Malagasy culture.

10 Keenan and Ochs (1979) also describe norms governing Malagasy speech based on their field work in the countryside. They lay out two important norms: the norm of non-committalism and the norm of non-confrontation which are related to norms about expressing truth. They link these norms to the concept HENATRA which is very similar to the concept TSINY. “Henatra” can be translated as *shame*, while “*tsiny*” can be translated as *blame* or *fault*. Care is taken not to confront others directly about misdeeds in Malagasy communities. Ochs (1974) does note that women are free to speak more directly than men according to norms governing speech. Direct confrontation obviously can cause shame. Commitment to specific future outcomes can also cause error and hence can cause shame. These norms cause Malagasy to seek harmonious opinion when expressing truth.

11 The Malagasy is *Fisaka ny rariny ka saro-tadiavina*.

12 The Malagasy is *Ny marina tsy mba maty*.

In the end, we can see that there are differences (and similarities) between social norms governing expressions of opinion; however, neither these facts nor Rajaona's reasoning involving etymology show that the basic concept TRUTH is different for Malagasy and Westerners.

Malagasy reasoning is distinct

Rajaona claims that Malagasy reasoning is distinct from Western reasoning. Western reasoning is systemic and employs proofs, while Malagasy reasoning uses comparisons that appeal to things in the natural order to make persuasive points. This sets up the distinction that Western reasoning is more abstract than Malagasy reasoning. So, there are two alleged differences here. First, Western reasoning is more systematic. Second, Western reasoning is more abstract. We take these points in turn.

Systemic versus non-systemic reasoning

Rajaona is right that Malagasy reasoning often appeals to proverbs, which themselves are often comparisons that appeal to animals and other elements of the natural order in order to provide typically prudential advice. There is no system building, though, in such comparative reasoning, according to him. Western philosophy, by contrast, consists of reasoning that uses various systems. The main point we think here is not whether there is a background system for the two proffered types of reasoning, because there is a system for both. Of course, not all systems are laid out explicitly. In some instances of Western philosophy, the system is laid out very explicitly from the beginning in terms of very precise axioms, principles, or claims. The explicitness of the system building is certainly missing in the Malagasy worldview, but just because the system is not displayed in a conspicuous way does not mean that there is no system. The default assumption by Malagasy themselves is that the proverbial wisdom passed down from the ancestors is itself a type of system. Even though it is certainly not laid out in the way that Spinoza or other Western philosophers lay out their system, it is no less *systemic* for that, though certainly less *explicit*. Until we have reason to think that there is a deep incoherence in the proverbial wisdom passed down by the ancestors, we should not view it as unsystematic. Much of the wisdom sounds the same themes: be cautious, cherish friends and family, take opportunities when they arise, nurture relationships with family and friends, avoid dishonour and so on. We can indeed view the proverbial wisdom as a moral system (more on this later).

So, Rajaona is certainly right that the reasoning by proverbs does not proceed in the same way as the classic systems of the great rationalist philosophers of the Western tradition. A very clear case of such deductive axiomatic system building is Spinoza's *Ethics*, which opens with definitions, then axioms, and then propositions, all new information being deduced from prior information established, the foundation of which is established *a priori*.¹³ Leibniz and Descartes are examples of other great rationalistic system builders. But not all Western philosophers have built their systems in such perspicuous ways. In fact, the majority take themselves to have coherent systems most of the time, yet the systematicity is not made as explicit as in the great rationalist philosophers. So, the difference here is not one of systemic versus non-systemic reasoning, that is, reasoning with a system and without. The difference at this point – until someone shows the system of proverbial wisdom to be incoherent or contradictory – is one of the degree to which the claims and axioms of some system are made explicit.

Proofs versus reasoning by comparison

An interesting place to start on this point is a linguistic one. The Malagasy word for the English word "proof" is "porofo", which is clearly a loan word from English. One reading of this etymological fact is that there was no authentic notion of proof in Malagasy culture. If there was one, there would be no need to import the word from English. "Proof" of course is ambiguous. At times, it means *evidence* and at other times it means *argument* (especially in logic and mathematics). There is a Malagasy term that adequately translates "argument"; "Fanamarinana" (*that which serves to level*

13 See Spinoza ([1677] 2002), "Ethics (Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata)," for a clear example.

or to balance) captures the idea expressed by “argument”. Perhaps the term “fanamarinana” carries the sense of open argumentation, where many sides of an issue must be examined, some of which Westerners would consider irrelevant. For instance, if there is a murder, in addition to considering the standard forensic and circumstantial evidence, social and familial relations must be taken into consideration as well in Madagascar. But it seems that “fanamarinana” is an acceptable translation of “proof” in the sense of argumentation. So, much more than this linguistic point is needed.

What is the method by which everyday Malagasy reason that is distinctively non-Western? Here Rajaona notes that Malagasy reason by comparison with elements of the natural order such as animals, people, and the environment. This is evidenced by the fact that many proverbs have comparative structures, syntactical structures that express comparisons.

- Ny...toy ny...
- Ny...ka....
- Tahaka ny...
- Ohatry ny...

Here are some examples:

- Toy ny vorom-bazaha: ary elatra, fa tsy ary fanidinana.¹⁴
- Toy ny fihavana-molotra ka tezitra vao mifanantona.¹⁵

It is certainly true that this form of reasoning is common to Malagasy and that proverbs often carry the day in argumentation. However, this is not a form of reasoning unique to Malagasy. Arguments by analogy (or analogical induction, as it is sometimes known) is a form of argument that has a long history in Western philosophy as well as in the more common, everyday thought of Westerners. William Paley’s famous argument for the existence of God in the 19th century, which compares the complexity of watches to the universe, is a clear example (Paley [1802] 1963). This is commonly known as one version of the design argument for God’s existence. There are many other examples of analogical induction which compare two things and draw an inference about one of these things compared based on a set of shared properties. Also, it must be noted that analogies permeate common thought in the West and arguably all societies. So, while this form of reasoning is not unique to the Malagasy mind, it must be said that the *content* of proverbs is uniquely Malagasy. The proverbs reference crickets, crocodiles, stones, and much else. These objects being compared are the elements of the natural world in Madagascar, so the proverbs have a unique frame of reference – even though the form of argument is not unique.

It also must be admitted, to return to the point about “porofo”, that formalised deductive argumentation is certainly not as common in Malagasy written philosophy as it is in written philosophy in the Western tradition. This is no doubt due to the long tradition in the West of formalising (typically deductive) reasoning, which goes back to Aristotle. Western philosophy employs a mixture of both deductive and inductive reasoning, but it has a history of formalising inferences (especially deductive ones) and symbolising the propositions used in these inferences. Rules have been discovered and systems have been articulated in a more sophisticated way than what one sees in Malagasy philosophy. Of course, this does not mark a distinct form of reasoning, but merely the work of more thinkers over more time on a specific branch of philosophy. Malagasy people and people from Western societies reason by both deduction and induction, so there is not an authentic Malagasy form of reasoning, though it is certainly true that Malagasy reason frequently

14 The literal translation is *Like the duck: it has been endowed with wings but not with flying ability*. This proverb is typically applied to people who squanders their gifts.

15 The literal translation is *Like lips’ good relationship: they approach one another only in anger*. This proverb is typically used as a reproach for people who are meeting to settle their dispute with somebody but have not visited that person before or regularly while in a good mood.

by reference to proverbs; this marks a unique *frame of reference*, the flora and fauna of Madagascar, which is certainly uniquely Malagasy.

We want to stress that we do not want to rule out possible subtle differences in reasoning styles between Malagasy and non-Malagasy at this point. We are not giving an argument against the possibility of there being some differences in the reasoning of Malagasy and individuals from Western societies. At this point, however, we know of no study that indicates that Westerners are more likely to reason by deduction than Malagasy or of any other difference in reasoning styles. Let us turn to the last claim about the differences in reasoning.

Concrete versus abstract reasoning

The point here is related to points just discussed. The idea is that Malagasy reasoning is somehow more concrete than Western reasoning for its use of comparison. Western reasoning, at least in the history of philosophy, has employed more deductive proofs and is therefore more abstract. Whether Malagasy reasoning is more concrete really turns on what we mean by the terms “concrete” and “abstract” here. It must be said that in terms of form, there is no reason for thinking that deduction is more abstract than induction. If it were, we would need a clear explanation of this fact, and there is not one in the offing. If the distinction marks the content of the reasoning as distinct from its form, then perhaps this point is true, but it has already been granted. Of course, Westerners reason about the concrete world just as readily as Malagasy, though the respective frames of references are distinct in terms of local peculiarities. Malagasy philosophy does not have an extensive written history, but there is clear evidence of Malagasy philosophers discussing abstract concepts such as the soul, fate and free will, space and time, among other topics.¹⁶ It seems that the clearest distinction to be made here is in terms of the formalism present in the history of Western philosophy. Formalised reasoning is more abstract in terms of its content because it essentially just tracks the form of an argument and not its content by using symbols to stand for content. This reflects the respective histories of philosophy in the West and in Madagascar. It is true that the history of Western philosophy contains a great deal more formal logic than Malagasy philosophy. However, from that fact alone, we cannot conclude that Malagasy people and people in Western societies reason differently.

So, in sum, there appears to be no fundamental distinction between the way that Malagasy and Westerners think or reason in terms of the method or form. Both groups use deductive and inductive reasoning. In terms of content, there are differences that track the respective differences in localities. There is also a rich tradition of formalisation in argument in Western philosophy that, to our knowledge, is virtually non-existent in writings on Malagasy philosophy and logic. So, there is a distinction in the respective written traditions of philosophy in terms of formalisation; however, this is very likely due to differences in the written traditions of Western and Malagasy philosophy rather than deep differences in ways of thinking between Westerners and Malagasy.

The Malagasy connection with the external world is distinct

Related to the distinction between concrete and abstract reasoning, Rajaona makes what is arguably his most striking claim about the distinction between the worldviews and ways of thought in claiming that Malagasy have a direct perception of the external world whereas Westerners have indirect perception given that their perception is mediated by categories in the form of ideas or concepts. In short, Malagasy more often think with images and Westerners more often with ideas, and this means that Malagasy’s contact with the world outside of the mind is more direct than the contact Westerners enjoy. The evidence for these claims comes from the use of imagery in speech, especially in *kabary* and other verbal arts that rely on metaphor.¹⁷ It is no doubt true that exposure to metaphors causes images in the mind as opposed to more straightforward, literal language. However, Westerners are exposed to a great deal of metaphorical language as well. Rajaona seems to accept that ideas and images are distinct, which is quite commonplace. However, he goes further and holds that it is possible to have an image that does not fall into any category. Surely this is true

¹⁶ See Antoine Rahajarizafy ([1953] 2004) and Arianala Ratiarivelo (2014) for examples.

¹⁷ See Ochs (1973) for an excellent analysis of the many intricacies surrounding *kabary*.

for *some* images, such as an afterimage we get from looking at a very bright light. It is not an image of *anything*. It is just a bright spot that I see in my visual field. However, such images appear to be the exception rather than the rule. If you imagine a house you used to live in, the image comes already conceptualised – and conceptualised along multiple dimensions in fact. It is not as if images are divorced from concepts. In fact, it is very difficult to think of an unconceptualised image in the way that Rajaona appears to be thinking outside of perhaps afterimages. In fact, such a thing would be nearly impossible to describe truly, as any attempt at a description would employ concepts, thereby challenging the idea that the image was free of categories. So, there are problems with even understanding the sort of images that Rajaona is positing here that explain the direct contact that Malagasy are supposed to have to the external world. Furthermore, there is no real explanation for why they have such images. His claim here is more or less just stated without further argumentation. If there is a reason in the mix, it is that Malagasy people are exposed to more metaphorical language. But for this to amount to a persuasive argument, Rajaona would have to make good on two further points to warrant the conclusion. First, he would have to show that there is much more exposure to metaphorical language in Madagascar as opposed to the West. A test for this seems possible and it does not seem overly difficult. Before a test is designed, though, we must face the fact that even if we had such experimental data, the second point that needs proving seems almost impossible to prove. Rajaona, or a supporter, would have the very difficult task of showing that exposure to metaphorical language gives rise to images that are free of categories or conceptualisation. Even if such images existed, how could one show that exposure to metaphor creates these images? It is hard to see how this claim could be supported or justified. In the paper, Rajaona more or less just states that it is true that Malagasy have direct contact to the external world. This is far from convincing when scrutinised.

Malagasy ethics is distinct

The picture that Rajaona paints of Malagasy ethical thinking strikes us as correct. It is a view of right and wrong that seeks balance and harmony and recognises that people are not morally perfect. It sees goodness as involving an adherence to traditional ways. It also incorporates the idea that it is not easy to reach a decision about right and wrong and that it is at times difficult to find justice.

Rajaona (1959) notes that the worldview of the ancient Malagasy saw evil as part of the world order. It was inescapable, and the job of the just was to try to balance good and evil. It was only after the influence of Christianity on traditional Malagasy thought that the idea emerged that evil was something to be eradicated entirely. Note the following proverbs that express elements of pre-Christian thought.

- *People are neither completely dry nor wet.*¹⁸ This proverb reminds us that people are not completely good or bad.
- *People are like eels in the water; they go this way and that.*¹⁹ This proverb reminds us that people are whimsical.
- *If one walks on the ground, one will probably slip. There is sky above one's head so one will probably get wet.*²⁰ This proverb is used to express the idea that people will make mistakes and that misfortune will inevitably befall one.

Part of the case for this point is linguistic and familiar from our discussion of truth earlier. Rajaona notes that “marina” is used not only to mean *true* but also *just* in a moral sense. We are familiar from before with the argument that says the concept MARINA carries with it the idea of levelling or balance. Similarly, the just man or woman is one who can balance good or evil. Here, though, there is more to the argument than the linguistic point. We also have evidence from proverbs like those above that suggest that ancient Malagasy saw the world as containing both good and bad.

18 The Malagasy is *Ny olombelona tsy main-tsy lena*.

19 The Malagasy is *Ny olombelona toy ny amalona an-drano ka be siasia*.

20 The Malagasy is *Madia tany ka mety ho solafaka, milohaloha lanitra ka mety ho lena*.

Gabrielle Navone (1957) discusses the idea in the traditional Malagasy worldview that evil is normal and inevitable. Ancient Malagasy had the realistic idea that one should strive to mitigate but not completely destroy badness or evil, as this task is surely impossible given what we have seen throughout history about human nature. Other Malagasy philosophers have noted that Malagasy ethics is an approach to ethics that focuses on harmony and balance. For example, of the basics of good behaviour, Rahajarizafy ([1953] 2004, 43) writes that there should not be too much here, not too much there, not too firm, not too loose.²¹ This idea of Rahajarizafy's seems to parallel Aristotle's famous Doctrine of the Mean from *Nicomachean Ethics* which says that virtuous action is always a mean between two extremes, one of excess and one of deficiency.²²

In "Aspects de la psychologie malgache vus à travers certains traits des 'Kabary' et quelques faits de langue", Rajaona focuses on traditional ways as being the standard for right or wrong. Here the idea is that the moral principles of the ancestors found in proverbs set the standard for right and wrong. He supports this idea by arguing that "tsara" means not just *good* or *beautiful* but *according to tradition*. Given the plausible hypothesis that some of the first Malagasy were immigrants from Austronesia on a large and vast, unknown island, there was reason for them to adhere to their traditional ways and to hew to these ways so as to preserve order. So, it should not strike us as surprising that this reverence for tradition emerged and was passed on through the generations. Rajaona also notes that there is a strong influence on community in Malagasy ethics. The notion *FIHAVANANA* is the most important normative concept in Malagasy ethics. The term "fihavanana" roughly translates as *kinship*. The root work is "havana" which means *relative* or *kin*. Striving for *fihavanana* is striving for a state of harmony. It is an ideal to be reached by treating others as if they were close relatives or family. As Sandron (2008) explains, the concept *FIHAVANANA* is based on the principle of solidarity, love, and respect for one another. An appreciate of *fihavanana* reminds us the individual is not primary. Rather, it is the whole, all of society, which should be thought of first. The bonds with others are more valuable than anything else and must always be preserved. There is the well-known proverb that attests to the value of *fihavanana*: *it is better to lose the basis of money than the basis of kinship or friendship*.²³ This has been a way of thinking that has tied Malagasy people together and has been at the core of their social interaction. It has undergone strain recently mainly due to political discord and economic hardship. Pilling (2018) notes that since 1960 Madagascar is the only non-conflict country to have become poorer. There has been political strife over the years and hostilities between the government and its people, but a large factor in explaining why things have not been worse is surely the role of *fihavanana* in society. Other cultures undergoing similar hardships would likely not be able to maintain the social fabric as long as Madagascar has under such harsh conditions without a similar concept at work in people's thinking.

There are other elements to Malagasy ethical thinking or Malagasy ethics that we see which are not discussed by Rajaona, such as the idea that justice is difficult to find. Note the following proverbs.

*Justice is elusive so it's hard to find.*²⁴

*Justice is not found without criticism.*²⁵

We agree that there are distinctive ways of thinking about ethics in the Malagasy worldview, ones that do have analogues in the history of thought. On the whole, the entire system is unique, we think, and in need of more systematic treatment by scholars. Rajaona deserves much credit for stressing that there is a very unique tradition of ethical thinking in the Malagasy worldview.

Universal and authentic elements in the Malagasy worldview

In the end, some genuine differences emerge between the respective worldviews. There are different

21 The Malagasy is *Izany no abidian'ny fahendrena: tsy mihoatra atsy tsy mihoatra aroa, tsy mihenjana loatra ary tsy mikitrika loatra.*

22 See especially Book 2, Chapters 6–9 of *Nicomachean Ethics*.

23 The original Malagasy is *Aleo very tsikalankalam-bola toy izay very tsikalankalam-pihavanana.*

24 The original Malagasy is *Fisaka ny rariny ka saro-tadiavina.*

25 The original Malagasy is *Ny rariny tsy hita raha tsy tsikeraina.*

norms related to expressing truth and its attainability, though the basic concept TRUTH, as we have stressed, is likely universal in all cultures. There is no tradition in Malagasy philosophy of formalising arguments and reasoning as there is in the Western tradition, though there is analogical reasoning in Malagasy and Western philosophy and in the everyday thinking of Malagasy and Westerners. Reasoning by both induction and deduction appears in both ways of thinking we have been discussing. We have no reason to think that Malagasy reason more concretely than Westerners at present, though the proverbs give Malagasy reasoning a unique content and frame of reference. Without some further argumentation, there is no reason to think that Malagasy have minds more populated by images than ideas or concepts or that they enjoy a special connection to the world outside of the mind. There is a distinctive tradition of Malagasy ethics found in the proverbs, and Rajaona astutely brings out many key features of this tradition. It contains elements with analogues from other philosophical traditions, but it does form something unique.

In the end, there are universal elements in the Malagasy worldview and also distinctively Malagasy elements. From our limited survey, the arguably universal elements have to do with the concept TRUTH and the use of both deductive and inductive reasoning. The unique elements have to do primarily with the distinctive content of Malagasy ethics and the use of proverbs in reasoning. The proverbs contain a unique frame of reference. It is also our sense that Malagasy proverbs carry a weight in the thinking of Malagasy that makes them unique.²⁶ As for Malagasy ethics, there are points of contact with Western views, such as connections to Aristotle in the praise of the individual who balances between extremes, but overall the system itself is unique. It is likely largely coherent and built largely out of proverbial sayings that reference the natural world of Madagascar. In the end, Rajaona's work on this topic is pioneering even if some points are overstated. This essay can be read as a corrective for these excesses. Without his original insight, however, the essay itself and any insight that follows would not have been possible.

ORCID

Casey Woodling  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6633-6450>

References

- Andriamanjato, R. 1957. *Le tsiny et le tody dans la pensee malgache*. Antananarivo: Edisiona Salohy.
- Dahl, Ø. 1999. *Meanings in Madagascar*. Bridgeport: Bergin and Garvey.
- Descartes, R. (1641) 1998. *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, Trans. D. Clarke. London: Penguin.
- Haring, L. 1992. *Verbal Arts in Madagascar: Performance in Historical Perspective*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. doi:10.9783/9781512816693.
- Houlter, J. A. 1915. *Ohabolana or Malagasy Proverbs Illustrating the Wit and Wisdom of the Hova of Madagascar*. 2 vols. Antananarivo: Friends' Foreign Missionary Association.
- Keenan, E. and E. Ochs. 1979. "Becoming a Competent Speaker of Malagasy." In: *Languages and Their Speakers*, edited by T. Shopen, 113–158. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Navone, G. 1957. *Ny atao no miverina, ou ethnologie et proverbes malgaches*. Fianarantsoa: Librairie Ambozontany.
- Ochs, E. 1973. "A Sliding Sense of Obligatoriness: The Poly-Structure of Malagasy Oratory." *Language in Society* 2 (02): 225–243. doi:10.1017/S0047404500000725.
- Ochs, E. 1974. "Norm-makers, Norm-breakers: Uses of Speech by Men and Women in a Malagasy Community." In: *Explorations in the ethnography of speaking*, edited by R. Bauman and J. Sherzer, 125–143. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Paley, W. (1802) 1963. *Natural Theology*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

26 Comparative evidence is needed to substantiate this claim. There are surely other cultural traditions where ancestral wisdom is passed down through proverbs and great reverence for such sayings can be observed. Our sense is that Madagascar is not the sole place where this is seen but unique (along with other cultures) in the substantial role that proverbs play in their general worldview.

- Pilling, D. 2018. "Madagascar caught in spiral of decline after decades of neglect." *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/815b9c9a-6af1-11e8-b6eb-4acfcfb08c11>
- Rahajarizafy, A. (1953) 2004. *Filozofia malagasy: "ny fanahy no olona*. Antananarivo: Editions Ambozontany.
- Rajaona, S. 1959. "Essai d'analyse de la structure de la pensée malgache, examen de quelques notions." *Bulletin de l'Académie Malgache* 37: 75–79.
- Rajaona, S. 1963. "Aspects de la psychologie malgache vus à travers certains traits des 'Kabary' et quelques faits de langue." *Annales Malgaches* 1: 23–37.
- Rakibolana Rakipahalalana. 2005. "Foko." Antananarivo: Akademia Malagasy.
- Ratiarivelo, A. 2008. *Filozofia Malagasy na ny fahalalana maha-hendry*. Antananarivo: Trano Printy Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy.
- Ratiarivelo, A. 2014. *Malagasy Philosophy*. Antananarivo: Vohitsera Press.
- Sandron, F. 2008. "Le Fihavanana à Madagascar : Lien social et économique des communautés Rurales." *Revue Tiers Monde* 195 (3): 507–522. doi:10.3917/rtm.195.0507
- Spinoza, B. (1677) 2002. "Ethics (Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata)." In: *Complete Works*, translated by S. Shirley and edited by M. Morgan, 312–382. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Viveiros de Castro, E. 2015. "Cosmologies: Perspectivism." In: *The Relative Native*, E. Viveiros de Castro, 195–228. Chicago: Hau Books.