

Living With the Dead in Madagascar

By Alex Bellos

First, we need to work out which of these five words is which. The way to do this is to look for patterns in the Malagasy words. For example, two Malagasy words have the same construction, the ones beginning with *maham/n-*. Two of the English translations have a similar construction, the ones beginning “one who can ...” It would be fair to connect those Malagasy words and translations.

Also, the word *lohalika* seems to appear in *mahandohalika*, with only a difference in the initial letter. Two of the translations contain the word “knee,” so we can hypothesize that *lohalika* is “knee,” and *mahandohalika* is “one who can get on his knees.”

That would make *mahambozona* “one who can carry something on his neck.” We are now left with two words, *hafaladia* and *kitrokely*, one that is “ankle” and one that is “up to the sole.”

Now we can turn our attention for the words for the grandchildren: *zafim-paladia*, *zafin-dohalika*, and *zafin-kitrokely*. We can surmise that the literal meaning of *zafin-dohalika* is something like “grandchild-knee.” We might guess that the other two will be “grandchild-ankle” and “grandchild-sole,” but as yet we don’t know which.

Kitrokely is used in its entirety in *zafin-kitrokely*, but *hafaladia* becomes *zafim-paladia*, which leads us to

believe that *hafaladia* contains an extra prefix that could mean “up to the.” Thus we get:

<i>zafin-dohalika</i>	grandchild-knee
<i>zafin-kitrokely</i>	grandchild-ankle
<i>zafim-paladia</i>	grandchild-sole

In fact, the correct translations are “... of the knee/ankle/sole.” Now we can make an educated guess that the each successive generation is referred to by a lower body part.

<i>zafin-dohalika</i>	great-great-grandchild
<i>zafin-kitrokely</i>	great-great-great-grandchild
<i>zafim-paladia</i>	great-great-great-great-grandchild

Michel Razafiarivony, professor of Malagasy Sociology and Culture at the University of Antananarivo, Madagascar, says that the reason these generations of grandchildren are named after body parts comes from the notion of *fihavanana*, the idea of solidarity and connection among members of the family and community. These links are “comparable to a human body, made up of interdependent organs, from the head (where the brain is, representing the wisdom of elders) to the feet (the children who have not yet grown up). That’s why we use these words to designate body parts, from the top to the bottom.”