

Dynamics of mourning celebrations in Southwest Madagascar in times of impoverishment and market integration

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Abstract

This paper examines the recent dynamics of the mourning celebrations, specifically the public funerary gift-giving in Southwest Madagascar. Although the high social and economic impact of such ceremonies on livelihoods in the developing world is recognized, little research has focused on the question how these systems transform over time and respond to broader political, societal and socio-economic shifts such as globalization, market integration, or impoverishment.

As in many parts of the world, Malagasy groups conduct lengthy public funerary celebrations that involve hundreds of participants and a continuous flow of gifts and counter-gifts. With the general impoverishment of Madagascar as one of the poorest countries of the world in many regions funerary spending has decreased. On the Mahafaly Plateau, in turn, a contrary development is taking place: Not only do the Mahafaly people still spend a relevant share of their annual expenditure for participation in funerals, the celebrations are becoming even bigger and exorbitantly luxurious.

The study based on interviews conducted in 26 Mahafaly villages explores triggers and mechanisms of change, especially the interplay between personal aspirations and societal ideologies reacting to influences from the urban areas, and how these translate into shifted societal norms and rules regarding mourning celebrations. Depicting a vicious circle of agonism and status seeking and stressing the high, however not necessary positive adaptability of traditional funerary systems and the importance of innovative individual behaviour, this paper contributes to our understanding of persistence and change in societies somewhere between tradition-focused live and modernity.

Introduction

Gift-giving has drawn the attention of scholars since the works of Malinowski (1922) and Mauss (1923). Today, societies in developing countries still rely heavily on such forms of social exchange which often help to buffer economic risk by solidarizing expenses. In non-western societies, gift-giving is said to mostly take place in the context of ceremonies and rituals such as funerals and is thus heavily formalized and shaped by specific rules. Thus, for our understanding of livelihoods and societies in the developing world, its mechanisms and rules of gift-giving are central, as well as the question how such gift-giving systems respond and transform to social or economic change such as globalization and market integration, increasing wealth or impoverishment.

The present article analysis changes in the contemporary system of funerary gift-giving among the agro-pastoral Mahafaly people living on the Mahafaly Plateau in Southwest Madagascar. Most Malagasy

groups conduct lengthy funerary celebrations that involve hundreds of participants and a continuous flow of gifts and counter-gifts which often plays a significant economic role in local livelihoods. With the general impoverishment of Madagascar, in many regions funerary spending has decreased. Today also 85% of the Mahafaly households classify as poor, with nearly 40% not having any wealth in livestock at all. However, here the costs of funerary gifts and other disbursements have increased constantly and one wonders why.

Data collection

The case study principally draws on qualitative data from fieldwork between June 2012 and April 2014 in 26 villages of the Mahafaly Plateau region in South-West Madagascar. The author conducted 77 exploratory interviews with help of Malagasy research assistants consecutively interpreting between the local Malagasy dialect and English. The author also took part in three funerary ceremonies in September 2013. Additionally, 47 structured interviews held by one of the research assistants, and people were asked 43 times to give basic information on all funeral parties having taken place in the region between 2013 and 2014. Interviews comprised on to up to four male and/or female persons (age: 15 - 90 years).

Results

The most relevant change in the mortuary practices of the Mahafaly people is the existence of tremendous funeral parties which became popular after 2000. Up to five parties per village and year were reported. Funeral parties are the only regional public events besides market days and have become the region's major events in terms of participants, social importance, and economic burden for both organizers and guests. On side of the organizers, the costs for music represent the biggest share of costs (depending on the days the band plays and its popularity: 300,000 - 3,000,000 MGA (88 - 880 US\$), followed by food and drinks. Food consists of rice and goat meat and analogous to rules on gift-giving, the amount and value of food given to the guests has to correlate with the value of the gifts received per guest group.). As an illustration, a 2-3-year-old zebu (200,000 - 350,000 MGA) corresponds to the salary of one year of cowboy work, while the money for goat of 20,000 MGA may be earned by 20 days of salaried field work or around 48 days of charcoal making. Fulfilling the rising gift duties also represent a big economic challenge as most people have to attend several parties per year. On side of party organizers, it cannot be calculated beforehand if they get into depth with the costs of the party or if the received gifts are valuable enough to even generate a surplus. Because of the economic burden, the term 'problem', locally defined as a negative situation solved by the expenditure of livestock, is often used as synonym for 'funeral party'.

Organizing a funeral party is not part of the bereaved family's moral duty to 'bury the relative well', however today presents a social norm and obligation towards the living. It has become a standard for all deceased people above 40 years. Not fulfilling the public expectation may entrain sanctioning in form of social gossip. On the other side of the coin of social chatting, a party considered extremely good gives the organizers a chance to get fame and social esteem. Thus, the specific arrangements and costs of the parties are heavily influenced by the self-increasing dynamics of social competition for fame. Most important factors contributing to a good party with the chance to get famous are, ordered by frequency of citation: A prominent music band, an ambience of a 'crowdedness' with many guests and spectators, much food and drinks, an expensive grave, many zebras spent for the related mortuary ceremonies (at least 30-40), and many gifts, especially zebras.

Party organizers started to behave in new ways without the intention to change the custom, but explicitly in order to get fame or pride from the public. Also the funerary gift-giving is shaped and its

dynamics driven by social competition and bargaining for social esteem or warding off public humiliation and loosing face. While formerly, funerary gifts were given during condolence by close relatives in a more or less familiar setting, today the gift-giving takes place in public. Therefore, many gifts are of higher value than the traditional social obligations demand. Most interviewees assessed the development of increasing funeral expenditures as bad but felt helpless and trapped in the mechanisms of social obligation and public pressure.

The main actors involved in gift-giving at a funeral party are the male organizers, the male 'guests', the guests' wives and daughters, and the spectators. The group of organizers in charge of the party and the other funerary ceremonies typically consists of the dead person's biological sons and brothers, or if these are already dead their sons taking over the position. The role of a 'guest' is defined by being personally invited to the party and consequently bringing a gift. Guests bringing a zebu have a specific role and outstanding importance: Interviewees asked how many guests they expected to attend often only counted the ones expected to bring a zebu. Every guest may bring relatives or friends which then have no own gift duties, however today often contribute to the gift of the guest or bring their own gift, especially if they are very close male relatives of the guest.

As all funeral parties take place publicly, there are up to several hundred of uninvited people present who stroll around, purchase drinks and food, dance and watch the presentation of gifts. This group has a crucial role in the constellation of actors by chatting on the quality of the party and gifts and thereby creating public opinion, social pressure and social humiliation. Grounded in their power to create 'fame or shame' by positive or negative gossip, the actor 'mass of spectators' has high bargaining power. The spectators' mayor interest is to get entertained. Seeing the groups of affines competing for the best gift is part of this entertainment and thus encouraged by gossip. By fulfilling the spectators' expectations, the gift-givers bargain for a positive feedback from the mass, or at least for not getting a negative one. The power of the 'mass' has increased over time with funeral parties having become socially more important and more and more spectators being present.

The guests bargain for social esteem by trying to bring the most valuable or most interesting gift at the entire party or trying to top the gifts of the other men of the same group of affines - What the others will bring is often beforehand communicated directly or arrives with rumors. Bargaining for respect and acceptance from side of the gift-receiving kin and especially one's parents in law, however, is a comparatively minor issue. Interviewees were very clear about the point that most positive or negative feedback to a gift does not come from the gift-receivers themselves but from the spectators. Aiming for ancestral blessing by rich gifts or another link between gift-giving and the world of the ancestors was nearly never stated. The most important guests and most important actors for the dynamics of gift-giving are the organizers' sons in law, followed by the organizers' fathers in law. Also the organizers' daughters accompanying their husbands are relevant actors as they often force their fathers and husbands to bring huge gifts. All guests of the same role of affines (e.g. all sons in law) together form a group of reference for one's gift performance. The competition for good gifts and famous parties was described by interviewees as *rengerenge* which implies boasting and a competition for being of high social status in the society. This phenomenon is said to be rather new.

Although the traditional livestock-gift is since decades complemented by money and lateron also by consumer stuff, zebu gifts are still the only gifts with high symbolic value and there is no convertibility or equivalency between money and livestock. Most people still prefer to receive and to give only - or mainly - zebus and money-gifts are normally of comparatively small sums starting from 5,000 MGA, although they can sum up to more than 2 Million MGA per party. Even people traveling to the party from far away mostly prefer to not bring money but buy a zebu on the local market. This preference is also due to a higher public visibility of a zebu compared to a small bundle of banknotes.

The value of consumer stuff gifts is defined by their practicability, novelty and range among the list-dependent status symbols (complete living rooms sets on the top, followed by hard wood furniture (especially bed-frames), foam mattresses, sewing machines, suitcases and plastic chairs, kitchen utilities, clothes and blankets). 'Introducing' an item as funeral gift can bring the gift-giver regional prominence and fame. New types of gifts were a heavily discussed development and perceived as a major change in the traditional funerary customs by interviewees.

The understanding of 'custom' (*fomba*) does not only embrace specific traditions such as ceremonies, but also common pattern of behavior or activities, e.g. 'doing agriculture'. *Fomba* are mostly seen as something one should or must follow, thus during interviews people often declared *fomba* as (more or less) equivalent with a *lily* (rule, command). Consequently, clarifying if the recent gift-giving is part of the local *fomba* is crucial. The current funeral ceremonies in general were by most interviewees perceived as still being the ancestral custom, but bringing many presents or doing a party with a music band mostly labeled a 'new custom'.

Besides having to follow a custom or rule, attending the funeral of a relative is a moral duty and not doing it entrains moral blame. Bringing a gift is also considered a must as it shows respect towards the death, but more importantly today presents a social obligation which derives from the duty and aim to maintain the so-called *filongoa*, embracing meanings of kinship, reciprocity, solidarity, and social harmony. The different degrees and characteristics of *filongoa* towards other people translate into customs with specific rules defining which kind of gift is considered appropriate. However, once the rule is fulfilled, additional gift-giving is said to not further positively influence the relationship between gift-giver and receiver and also not perceived as a sign of generosity or kindness. Giving more than the expected value was mainly declared as being only driven by the aim to get fame, pride and honor. On the other side of displaying one's high ability to give and thus wealth, revealing poverty as in the case of not being economically able to bring the expected gift is per se shameful.

Gift-giving obligations are most sharply defined between men and their fathers in law as the highly respectful 'wife-givers'. In the context of funerary visits, the fathers in law should traditionally receive one zebu. While some interviewees insisted that it should be a castrated and thus very valuable one, others declared the value of the zebu as irrelevant. The duty of bringing a zebu to fathers in law is supported by the narrative that formerly and today the parents in law have the right to take their daughter back and marry her with another man if the son in law does not bring a zebu. Today, the common gift pattern is giving the father in law two zebus or a zebu plus quite an amount of money.

Besides a certain personal kinship relationship, gift obligations may also exist due to an institutionalized specific invitation and rules on counter-gift-giving. The oral invitation to the party may include a standardized expression making clear that one expects the guests to bring a zebu. Most interviewees felt that this zebu-requesting invitation has always be fulfilled. Another expression is used to indicate that the guest has a free choice on the gift or, according to other interviewees' perceptions, that he should bring a smaller amount of money. However, many inviter-guest constellations imply that the guest has formerly on another occasion received a gift from the current organizer and has now, according to the traditional social norm of reciprocal gift-giving, give a gift of same type and same or higher monetary value back.

Despite the existence of many customs or rules on gift-giving, gift-giving is often perceived as a voluntary act. Particularly, opinions on the zebu-gift from son in law to father in law differed substantially: Half of the interviewees saw giving a (castrated) zebu to the father in law as an obligation. Within this group, the views contradicted if every gift beyond the first zebu is 'just an addition to the rule' or if 'at least one (castrated) zebu plus extras' in form of livestock, money, or items presents the new obligation. Other

interviewees insisted that bringing a (castrated) zebu is the common gift, however a voluntary one and also not a requisite for being accepted as a good son in law. Some people even resisted the idea of tying rules to an obligation.

The indispensability of rules was also questioned - many interviewees persisted in an economic exit-option and abrogated duty conditional to poor economic conditions of the gift-giver. This was not only explained by empathic comprehension but as being an elementary part of the rule. Also the rule of reciprocal gift-giving was often perceived coming with an 'economic exit-option' which however induces a duty to 'rectify' once the economic situation allows for it.

Discussion and conclusion

The case study of contemporary funerary gift-giving and attached ceremonies among the Mahafaly people in Madagascar demonstrates how a long-standing gift-giving system in a rather traditional society changes continuously and adapts to ongoing market integration, individualization, changes of values attached to life and death, and consumerism.

It presents a 21st century example of an individualized and agonistic gift-giving system which is not declining but even on the rise in terms of societal and socio-economic importance. The dynamics of increasing societal competition and boasting resembles observations described by Nicolas (1968) for the 1950th and 1960th in several parts of Africa. All described systems are characterized by agonistic gift-giving and bargaining for fame and pride. This demonstrates that agonistic gift-giving systems are not only as rare as often assumed but do also show opposite or at least different dynamics than non-agonistic ones. Compared to the former local gift-giving system (Middleton 1988) as well as well-known agonistic systems of the past such as the North American Potlach and the Kula-ring in Papua New Guinea, the contemporary Mahafaly system with its 'modernized', this is, individualized, social background presents much lower degrees of ritualized, group-bound aggressiveness and hostility. Regarding its degree of aggressive and hostility and aggressiveness, for example, the Mahafaly case however shows crucial differences related to the famous former very agonistic gift-giving rituals of. The study also contrasts to several findings that pattern of pro-social social exchange erode with development and especially market integration and only persist if they can be economically instrumentalized by those with power.

Gift-giving, gift-giving and other forms of social exchange do often have the rationality of providing household security and disaster relief for those most on need. Instead of these also here originally underlying rationales of economic solidarity, the today's case presents a societal and economic threat to all involved actors while nobody can constantly benefit from the changes. The people on the Mahafaly Plateau find themselves trapped in a kind of vicious circle of ever increasing gift-giving and funeral expenditures. Social pressure, mostly created by the accumulated unbridled and heedless gossip of people not directly involved in the gift-giving act and a gift-giving directly translating into societal 'fame or shame' levers out the explicit traditional rules on gift-giving with their economic-exit options for gift duties that the givers economic situation does not allow to fulfil. All gift-transfers are typically reckoned in several ways by all involved individuals and groups and 'sharing without reckoning' is an exception. Most importantly, the gift-giving is heavily shaped by the wide-spread rule of counter-gift-giving which translates into a relationship of debt between gift donor and receiver.

The Mahafaly case also differs in many aspects from the typically described internal logics of customs and Mahafaly society as related to the "transformation of wealth into sanctity" (Lambek 2008:148). The main determinants of ritual-related behaviour are often said to be shame and losing face related to provoking ancestral wrath, misfortune and moral blame from the ancestors and thus the local

community. The contemporary funerals and its gift-giving among the Mahafaly present a transformation of wealth into the maintenance or increase of social status (cf. Mauss (1923)).

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