



Munich Personal RePEc Archive

# **It's a kind of suicide: Dynamics of funerary gift-giving and institutional change in South-West Madagascar**

Goetter, Johanna Friederike

Brandenburg Technical University Cottbus-Senftenberg

January 2020

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/111704/>  
MPRA Paper No. 111704, posted 05 Feb 2022 04:44 UTC

# It's a kind of suicide: Dynamics of funerary gift-giving and institutional change in South-West Madagascar

Johanna Friederike Goetter (Brandenburg Technical University Cottbus-Senftenberg)

## Abstract

This paper examines the recent dynamics of funerary gift-giving in rural South-West Madagascar against changes in local livelihoods and the society. A conceptual framework combining gift-giving theory with a model on institutional change from Institutional Economic Anthropology is designed to analyze empirical data derived from interviews conducted in 26 villages in the Mahafaly Plateau region. The study finds that social pressure, mostly created by gift-giving directly translating into societal 'fame or shame', paired with the accumulated gossip of people not directly involved, levers out explicit traditional rules on gift-giving and their pro-social economic-exit options to gift-giving duties. Reverse to the originally underlying rationale of economic solidarity with the bereaved, gift-giving today presents a societal and economic threat to gift-givers and -receivers.

The present research contributes to our understanding of changes and dynamics in traditional gift-giving systems, especially in agonistic ones. Although the high social and economic impact of gift-giving in the developing world is recognized, very little research has focused on the question of how these gift-giving systems transform and adapt. The study depicts the importance of innovative individual behavior and personal aspirations, as well as the interplay of actors beyond the scope of the classical donor-receiver and kinship relations and reciprocity considerations gift-giving theory classically focuses on. The study also shows that personal norms and social norms of a general societal level must be considered in the analysis of changes in gift-giving systems.

**Keywords:** Institutional change, gift-giving, Madagascar, institutions, social norms, agency, bargaining power, institutional economics, economic anthropology

**JEL Codes:** B52, O17, N57, Z13

## 1. Introduction

Gift-giving has drawn the attention of scholars since the work of Mauss (1923). Today, in many societies of developing countries, gift-giving still complements and even competes with market processes. People here still rely heavily on such forms of social exchange which often help to buffer economic risk by solidarizing expenses (Baird & Gray 2014, Dobuzinskis 2003, Platteau 2006). Here, 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 (Berking 1999). Thus, the mechanisms and rules of gift-giving and its specific dynamics are central to our understanding of livelihoods and societies in the developing world (Eisenstein 2011, Godelier 2004). However, two knowledge gaps remain: First of all, studies on gift-giving in contemporary non-western societies are very rare. Second, very little is known about how gift-giving systems transform under the influence of social change and societal evolution. Such research has mostly dealt with the impacts of colonization (e.g. Drucker & Heizer 1967, Gregory 1980). In turn, change in gift-giving systems in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is only rarely empirically explored, both for non-western as well as western societies (see for example Heal 2014, Minowa, Khomenko & Belk 2010). The many experiment- and game-based studies on change do not contribute to our understanding of gift-giving systems as they focus exclusively on individual behavior in rather unspecific settings.

The present article aims to fill parts of these knowledge gaps by analyzing the development of the contemporary system of funerary gift-giving among people in South-West Madagascar. Funerals in Madagascar traditionally play a significant socio-cultural and economic role in local livelihoods and often involve hundreds of participants and a continuous flow of gifts and counter-gifts (Bloch 1989, 2010, Fee 2000, Heurtebize 1997, Huntington 1973, Jaovelo-Dzao 1996, Middleton 2009, Wüstefeld 2004). After Independence in 1960, mortuary traditions have become even more important for many ethnic groups (Feeley-Harnik 1984). In the last decades, then, in many regions funerary spending has decreased due to ongoing impoverishment (Delcroix & Fauroux 1994, Middleton 2009, Wüstefeld 2004). In the study area, however, people still spend a relevant share of their annual expenditure on participation in funerals (Hänke & Barkmann 2017) and the costs of funerary gifts and other disbursements are also said to increase constantly (Kaufmann 2011), even though the region is one of the poorest in Madagascar. Malagasy funerary practices have been studied mostly from the perspectives of social integration and identity, kinship, connection to ancestors and rites of passage (e.g. Bloch 1989, Fee 2000, Huntington 1973, Jaovelo-Dzao 1996), while funerary gift-giving has seldom been considered in detail (e.g., Fee 2000, Middleton 1988).

The present study is guided by a conceptual framework combining gift-giving theory with a model on institutional change from Institutional Economic Anthropology (Ensminger 1992). In line with the framework, I will analyze the current dynamics of funerary gift-giving in the study region as well as its traditional and recent cultural logics and institutions, examine the role of ideology, bargaining power and individual decision-making and behavior on these dynamics, and align the interplay of these with the changing societal and economic environment. Doing this, the study aims to merge economic and anthropological perspectives, and to respond to the call to “reinvigorate and re-energize anthropological discussions of exchange, which tend to either rely heavily on – or to take a critical stance towards – arguments put forth by Mauss nearly a century ago” (Wood 2016:xvi-xvii).

## 2. Conceptual framework and definition of terms

The analytical framework chosen here combines gift-giving theory (for an overview see Befu (1977) and Sherry (1983)) with a framework on institutional change from Institutional Economic Anthropology (Ensminger 1992). This specific combination (see Figure 1) makes it possible to arrange the specific insights and concepts developed in gift-giving theory in a way that allows for assumptions about logical relationships and dynamics between the different elements, and provides a focus on change - two aspects only poorly covered by gift-giving theory alone.

Gift-giving theory deals mainly with people’s reasons and stimuli to give a certain gift. A main question is if decision-making is mainly shaped by the giver’s personal motivations, or a structural (also called institutional) pattern. Such structures are mostly norms of reciprocity and other institutionalized obligations attached to gifts. In the framework, this is mirrored by ‘institutions’. Per definition of Ensminger (1992), ‘institutions’ here can comprise formal rules such as legal regulations given by the state or a community, informal constraints such as social norms, or their corresponding enforcement mechanisms. I opt to also include institutionalized personal norms and strategies (Schlüter & Theesfeld 2010), as this reflects the importance of combining structural and motivational approaches when studying gift-giving (cf. Befu 1977, Sherry 1983).

Rules are understood here as institutions the contravention of which entails tangible, material sanctioning (e.g. a fine), while breaking social norms is sanctioned by way of a negative emotional reaction of other people (e.g. gossip, ostracism) and breaking one’s own personal norm may result in feeling bad (e.g. guilty or ashamed). On the other hand, personal strategies do not lead to any sanctions as they are merely bound to practical considerations (e.g. how to best save time or money) but have no ideological or moral basis (Schlüter & Theesfeld 2010).

The 'sociocultural context' in which the gift-giving takes place not only defines these institutions, but also the relevant resource types and so-called 'spheres of exchange' pointing to the cosmological, symbolic or social meaning and message of a gift (see 'Ideology'). 'Ideology' as used in the framework also includes the people's common values, mental models, and ideals that "determine people's goals and shape their choices" (Ensminger 1992:5), as well as ideological narratives as ideologically shaped explanations for certain phenomena and discourses as a "specific way of linking issues and rationalizing topics in a logical way" (Haller 2010:57). For example, the actors may understand gift-giving as a means of maintaining long-term cosmic order or for role modeling and maintaining a certain social hierarchy (cf. Bourdieu 1990).

Also central to gift-giving theory is the classification of gift-exchange in relation to its 'distributional effects' and the 'constellation of actors' (in the original framework originally called 'organization'): Looking at whether exchange partners give away and receive the same value or whether someone in the long run economically or socially gains by the exchange, a gift pattern can be classified as 'pure gift' or 'total prestation', or as 'balanced' or as 'negative' exchange. Which cases prevail is said to be mainly determined by the relationship of the actors, especially in terms of kinship distance. The exchange partners may be equal in terms of status (horizontal exchange), or having some kind of unequal, e.g. patron-client relationship (vertical exchange).

Furthermore, personal parameters such as sociability and generosity, plus the function the gift-givers attribute to the giving, e.g. saving, role modeling or social integration, play a role ('Individual Behavior'). Another relevant factor in gift-giving theory is the power of actors, which in institutionalism is called 'bargaining power'. It describes the ability "to get something one wants from others" (Ensminger 1992:7). A prominent example is the power to socially humiliate the receiver during the traditional potlatch ceremonies of the North American Pacific North-West coast (Rosman & Rubel 1971). Bargaining power often arises from a certain societal position and may even include the ability to influence the ideology of others.

All these factors can be clustered and put into a logical relationship within the framework (see Figure 1). But the framework also adds further aspects which are not directly addressed in gift-giving theory. At the heart of the framework lies the box of 'internal change' with the interplay of ideology, institutions, constellation of actors and bargaining power. These changes however do not happen 'out of the blue', but are induced by a shift in so-called 'relative prices', that is, "the value of something in relation to what one must give up for it" (Ensminger 1992:4). Such a

shift is seen as a consequence of changes in the 'external factors' consisting of the social, ecological, political, economic or technological environment and the population (size). The 'internal changes' are assumed to have 'distributive consequences' for individuals and their 'behavior', which then may feed back into changes in the 'external factors'.

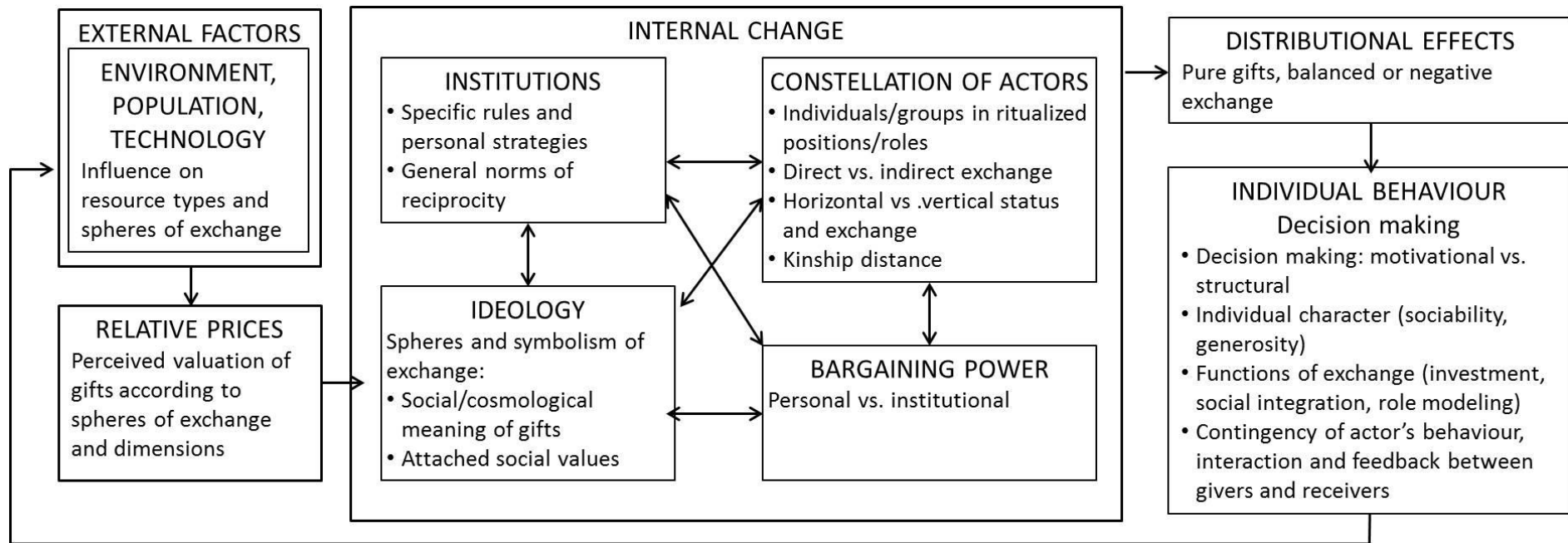


Figure 1: Main elements of gift-giving theory (Befu 1977, Sherry 1983) combined with the framework for analyzing institutional change (Ensminger 1992)

### 3. Data collection and analysis

The case study principally draws on qualitative data from fieldwork conducted between June 2012 and April 2014 in 26 villages of the Mahafaly Plateau and the Mahafaly Coastal Plain in South-West Madagascar, inhabited by Mahafaly and Mahafaly-Tanalana people. The study area extends from Soalara in the North to Vohombe in the South, and from Ambatry in the East to the ocean in the West.

The author conducted exploratory interviews with the help of Malagasy research assistants consecutively interpreting between the local Malagasy dialect and English. The exploratory interviews were complemented by structured interviews designed by the author and conducted by one of the research assistants. The exploratory interviews (N=77) addressed the interviewees' knowledge and perceptions of funerals in general, as well as partly also their personal experiences and behavior in specific funeral events (N=66), and/or information and perceptions regarding poverty and wealth, consumption, and lifestyle (N=21). The structured interviews (N=47) dealt with the interviewees' individual experiences as funeral organizers' (N=11) or guests (N=20) and their general perceptions of changes, or with young people's funerary knowledge and perceptions (N=16, age 15-25). The author also took part in three funerary ceremonies in September 2013. Fourteen of the interviews were held with respective organizers and guests before and/or after the corresponding events. Additionally, people were asked to list all funeral parties taking place in the region between 2013 and 2014, the corresponding amounts of gifts, as well as to explain what makes a party famous and to give an example of a very famous party (N=43).

Most interviews were held with one interviewee (N=124), a smaller number with two persons (N=31) or three to four persons (N=15). The interviewees' age ranged between 15 and 90, with over 70% being between 20 and 59 years old. As only men organize funerals and also as guests play a more active role, most interviews were held with men (N=112), however 40 interviews were done exclusively with women, and 18 with men and women together. Ten persons were interviewed more often than once.

Audio-records were taken during the interviews. In the case of interviews held by the author, the time needed for consecutive translation was used to take very comprehensive handwritten notes of the translation. These field notes were then transcribed into digital versions and replenished by the assistants with the help of the audio-records. All structured and some of the exploratory interviews were completely transcribed from the audio-records by the assistants.



An inductive content analysis was done, using the QDA software Atlas.ti to code and theme the interviews.

For sustaining and complementing the collected data on former funerary customs, the author draws on the existing literature on funerary customs among similar agro-pastoral societies in the South of Madagascar.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *Changes in local livelihoods*

The study area is mainly inhabited by agro-pastoral people. Their animals – goats, sheep, and especially zebu-cattle – have a high cultural value and function as a kind of living savings account. Livestock is, in general, a ‘male business’. Women do not possess or manage cattle, and, in most of the study region, they do not own goats or sheep either. However, there are multiple traditional forms and specific familiar arrangements of de facto female possession of small ruminants.

The number of a man’s livestock is synonymous with his economic wellbeing (cf. Wüstefeld 2004). While the average zebu cattle herd consists of 16 animals (Neudert et al. 2015), wealth is very unevenly distributed with some households owning more than 200 cattle and 37% not owning any livestock at all (unpublished project data from 634 households, 2012). Using recent local categories of wealth (SuLaMa 2011), wealth is locally defined as owning more than 60 cattle and over 100 small ruminants per core family. Being wealthy means independence from the economic help of relatives and the ability to fulfil the social obligations, e.g. livestock donations for funerals (cf. Pannoux 1991, Schomerus-Gernböck 1981). Today, more than 85% of the households own less than 20 zebus and 20 small ruminants and thus locally classify as poor, a category labelled as ‘suffering’ and ‘being hungry’ (SuLaMa 2011).

This widespread ‘cattle-poorness’ can be traced back to the 1960s (e.g. Schomerus-Gernböck 1971) and the literature documents a persistent ‘livestock crisis’ for the whole of South-West Madagascar since the late 1980s (cf. Fieloux 1987). However, all older interviewees described today’s life in the region as ‘having become hard’ due to a rather recent impoverishment in cattle (see Figure 9 - Environment). This was associated with climate-induced harvest losses in this semi-arid region which increased the need to ‘spend’ cattle for buying food, as well as with several animal diseases and extreme droughts with a lack of fodder and water. Food insecurity today affects more than half of local households (Neudert et al. 2015) and the annual lean season has extended to three months per year (Hänke & Barkmann 2017).

At the same time, a socio-economic transition is ongoing (see Figure 9 - Environment): Although wealth is in general still mostly depicted in the form of animals, preferences for the allocation of capital and status symbols are changing. Some people do already live in houses made of wooden planks with roofs of corrugated iron instead of the traditional huts made of twigs and roofs of local material. Though there is still no electricity, a small number of households today even possess video recorders (see Figure 9 - Technology). Livestock is still a form of local currency with fixed values for purchase, fines and standardized gifts. However, older interviewees worried about an increasing need for cash currency in everyday life. At the same time, cash is perceived to be comparatively easy to get today<sup>1</sup> and 'on the rise', while cattle are a good declared as 'having become difficult to find' (see Figure 9 - Relative Prices):

"Today, the children are fed by money, not by cattle." [12:134, male, age: 42]

The concomitant monetarization has reached formerly freely available goods such as cattle fodder (see Chapter 3). Many interviewees – including the younger ones – complained about 'new', 'modern' or '*vazaha*' times (*vazaha* = strangers, white people) which are said to also have led to a deterioration of social life in the villages, especially an increase in anti-social or non-rule-conforming behavior (see Chapter 2).

These perceptions of interviewees on impoverishment, deterioration of social life, and market integration can be traced back to the 1950s<sup>2</sup>, especially regarding an increased need to spend capital on consumer goods or on increasing social duties such as marriage gifts (cf. Battistini 1964a, Kaufmann & Tsirahamba 2006). Thus, besides real shifts in relative prices, they also illustrate the character of the local ideological discourse on livelihoods in general and funerary gift-giving in particular (see Figure 9 - Ideology).

#### 4.2. *Changes in mortuary practices*

The ample traditional Mahafaly mortuary rituals are amongst the most famous in Madagascar, specifically the very costly traditional graves. These several square meters large stone tombs indicating the wealth of the buried (cf. Decary 1951) are still part of local culture (see Figure 2).

---

<sup>1</sup> While people often wondered that 'money is very easy to find today' and 'today even a child can have 10.000 Ariary', most people were not aware of the mechanism of inflation and did not have knowledge of the comparatively high inflation rate in Madagascar (e.g., inflation rate for consumer prices in 2014: 6,1%, CIA The World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ma.html>, retrieved: 18.4.2015). At the same time, the constant rise of prices for products on the local market was often used as a proof that life has become expensive and difficult.

<sup>2</sup> This perception of deterioration of life has definitely become more severe, but is, of course, not completely new. Also Battistini who did field research in the study region from 1956-1959 documented similar perceptions: "In ancient times, the zebus had enough to eat! [...] This is the civilization [...] Some youth don't obey their parents and don't like to work on the fields and look after the cattle" (Tanalana-woman cited by Battistini (1969: III-2, orig. in French)).



**Figure 2: Grave on the coastal plain of the Mahafaly Plateau region (own picture, 2013)**

However, many interviewees questioned the traditional emphasis on using a large share of the monetary resources for preparing for life after death with “tombs, whose elaborate and solid constructions far exceed the care given to the houses of the living” (Huntington 1973:65):

“Instead of eating bad food and having a bad and small house while I am alive, [...] I prefer to not get a big tomb, because dead is dead and the bones put there are the same.” [217:2, male, age: 35]

Mahafaly funerals are aligned with a well-known saga about a “meat orgy” and “blood bath” wherein the whole cattle herd (or at least a high share) of a deceased man is sacrificed (Decary 1951:253, also see Mack 1986). Today, funerals still demand the slaughter of animals. Nevertheless, these are not sacrificed in the sense of some ritual directed towards the supernatural or ancestral world. Some animals from the deceased or his/her sons’ herds are slaughtered as a kind of luxury food and custom-defined acknowledgement for those men who contributed with hard physical work to the funeral, e.g., by making the coffin or the tomb by hand and digging the stones for it (cf. Schomerus-Gernböck 1971). Furthermore, all interviewees insisted that there has never been a moral duty or custom to sacrifice or spend a man’s whole cattle herd for his burial or his tomb. Doing this was widely perceived as absurd as his herd serves as basis of future generations’ prosperity.

Additionally, general impoverishment causes many families to decide to follow an economic ‘minimum standard’ of funerals which still counts as having ‘fulfilled’ the custom and is said to be socially accepted by the living as well as the ancestors (see Figure 9 - Environment). Thus, the reported number of zebus slaughtered in the last years in the context of the preparation of the grave did not exceed 12, while the older literature reports numbers of up to 100 zebus (Frère 1958, Mack 1986, Pannoux 1991). Also, the workers who constructed the coffin are traditionally served the meat of one zebu, but slaughtering an economically and culturally less valuable goat has become common.

The most relevant change is the existence of tremendous funeral parties (see Figure 9 - Environment). These parties called *fisa* (game, amusement) or *havoria* (gathering) are a rather

recent phenomenon and have fast become popular, namely in the early 2000s. Consequently, no explicit mentioning of funeral parties can be found in the literature, despite the comparatively recent work by Evers (2002). When interviewees were asked to name the local customs, funerals and especially funeral parties were most often stated and also stated first. In comparison, the older literature describes the finishing of the grave with the slaughter of a zebu and the distribution of its meat (*hena ratsy*) to the guests as the most important part of the funeral (cf. Burgess 1932, Jaovelo-Dzao 1991, Schomerus-Gernböck 1981).

The 3 to 7 day-long funeral parties with fairground character attract masses of spectators in a radius of around 30km, involving considerable travel times by foot or ox cart. Funeral parties are the only regional public events besides market days and have become the region's main events in terms of participants, social importance, and economic burden for organizers and guests. On account of the described economic weight, 'funeral party' was largely paraphrased by interviewees by the term '*problem*', a term locally defined as a negative situation which is solved by spending livestock. Most parties take place within the 'party season' between August and October, which is a relaxed period because of previous annual agricultural harvests. Up to five parties per village and season were reported.

The party ceremonies include the ritual of accomplishment of the tomb construction, and are among the last acts related to the death. The construction itself requires a considerable amount of money and also the funeral parties are very costly to organize although no slaughtering of cattle takes place at the party. Therefore, it is common and socially accepted to delay the party till the family has raised the money for both party and tomb. A delay of one year after the death is the most common time frame but it may extend to several years (cf. Cole & Middleton 2001, Kaufmann 2011). According to the interviewees and also the literature, this period has been extended, e.g., Heurtebize (1997) found completing the tomb some months after the death as the norm and Frère (1958) observed a timespan of up to a year. Raising money for the party and the tomb often implies that younger male family members are sent elsewhere to look for wage labor and may remain outside the region for up to two years.<sup>3</sup> Often also the guests need to make major efforts to produce savings for their funerary gift, thus invitations are done about one year in advance.

---

<sup>3</sup> Migration for wage labour often means looking for a job in Toliara or working at the sapphire companies. A typical local activity to make money for funerals is slash-and-burn-agriculture (*teteke*).

The music constitutes the largest share of the party costs. The cost of engaging a band<sup>4</sup> (see Figure 3) ranges between 300,000 MGA and 3,000,000 MGA<sup>5</sup>, depending on its popularity and the number of days it plays. Hiring a DJ is much more economic but less popular. Additionally, large amounts of food and alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks are distributed to the invited guests. Common party food consists of rice and goat meat, a dish limited to festivities or small portions once a week in case of richer families (Neudert et al. 2015). The costs for the music are normally shared equally among all organizing family members, while Dutch treat prevails for the food and drinks each organizer independently prepares for his personal guests. A further change is related to the use of animals received from corporate groups during the funeral. While traditionally, gift animals received from corporate groups during the funeral were slaughtered and consumed as a sign of social cohesion (cf. Decary 1962, Evers 2002, Faublée 1954), today they are mostly sold directly after the funeral in order to pay off the described liabilities, and a possible 'surplus' is added to the recipients' herd.



Figure 3: Music band playing on a funeral party in the Mahafaly Plateau region (own picture, 2013)



Figure 4: Coffee and fruits of *Ziziphus* for sale at a funeral party in the Mahafaly Plateau region (own picture, 2013)

Analogous to rules on gift-giving, the food given to every guest or guest group has to correlate with the value of the gifts received from him or them. As a general rule, every [big] zebu received as a gift entrains counter-food (*famaha*) in the form of a [big] castrated goat and 10-20 cups of uncooked rice. Having received a goat, sheep or lower amount of money (below 100,000 MGA<sup>6</sup>) requires giving back 1.0 to 1.5 kg of goat meat and 4-5 cups of rice, while bigger amounts of money entrain giving a small goat and 10-20 cups of rice. The goats are bought in the village or neighboring villages, while the drinks are bought far away in a city. Goats and drinks are normally bought on credit and paid after the party – in case of the drinks, in cash money obtained from selling the gifts, in case of the goats, mostly directly in-kind with gift animals, with fixed conversion rates between zebras and goats.

<sup>4</sup> While daily life in the villages still takes place without any form of electricity (besides small portable radios with batteries, since 2013), during these parties, large electricity generators for the music amplifiers pop up.

<sup>5</sup> 76.32 - 763 US\$ (all given rates retrieved from oanda.com at 28.11.2020).

<sup>6</sup> Below 25.5 US\$

Completing the funeral ceremonies with a public party has become a standard for all deceased whose death is said to be 'not too sad', that is, having died at an age above 40 years. Such a funeral party is however not part of the family's moral duty to 'bury the relative well'. Consequently, still valid traditional reasons for investing in rituals (e.g., in circumcisions) such as ancestral blessing, or otherwise fear of moral blame (*hakeo*<sup>7</sup>), sin and punishment by the angry spirit of the dead or other ancestors, do not play a major role for funeral parties. But, organizing a party today represents a social norm and obligation towards the living. Not fulfilling the public expectation may entrain sanctioning in the form of social gossip. Interviewees repeatedly claimed a rise in hard-heartedness of invited guests and pure spectators: These would not show compassion and ignore many families' tough economic situation, instead gossiping if these had not made the utmost effort to organize a good party, for example by loaning money.

On the other side of the coin of social chatting, a party considered to be extremely good gives the organizers a chance to gain 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 reported as contributing to a good party with the chance to become famous are, ordered by frequency of citation: A prominent music band, an ambience of 'crowdedness' with many guests and spectators, much food and drink, an expensive grave, many zebus spent for the related mortuary ceremonies (at least 30-40 in total), and many gifts, especially zebus. The comparatively low importance of gifts is sustained by the numbers of zebu gifts given at parties in general, compared to the parties that interviewees remember as 'famous': At parties reported as being especially famous (N=27, cited years: 1997-2011) on average 135 zebus were given, however also funerals with relatively few gifts became famous (values: 25-500, median  $\bar{X}$ : 80). Quoted numbers of zebus given at other parties (N=161) are lower with 62 on average, but again with high dispersion (values: 2-440, median  $\bar{X}$ : 40).

Among the Mahafaly clans of the higher plateau, total spending in terms of money and zebus sold or slaughtered for the funeral and the party is today manifested by writing it on the side of the tomb and putting the corresponding number of zebu bucrania on it (see Figure 6 and Figure 5). Formerly, these numbers only indicated the costs of the funeral itself, that is, mostly for the grave (cf. Decary 1962, Pannoux 1991, Schomerus-Gernböck 1981). On the coastal plain, writing the numbers on the tomb is not common, but some Mahafaly-Tanalana-clans have started to place the corresponding bucrania on the tombs.

---

<sup>7</sup> For more information about the concept of *hakeo* in the South of Madagascar, see Thielsen (2016) and Fee (2000).



The prospect of gaining public recognition has led the bereaved to behave in new ways, without the intention of changing the custom:

“In this village, my family started with this [...]: We made a big party and sent for a famous music band. [...] We aimed to boast and looked for fame.” [185:38, male, age: around 80]



Figure 6: Zebu bucrania on a tomb on the Mahafaly Plateau (own picture, 2013)

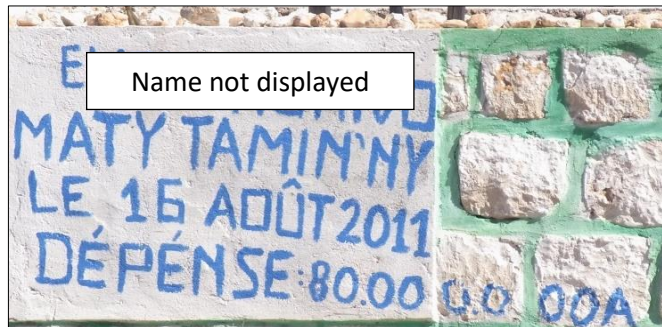


Figure 5: Detail of grave on the Mahafaly Plateau (own picture, 2013)

#### 4.3. Funerary gift-giving

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 on a designated day (*rorombola*) of the party (see Figure 9 - Environment). Gift-giving is today the highlight of the funeral: Every guest group dances one by one around the public dance place with the band or DJ in the center. Plastic bags full of money and other gifts are raised into the air and animals are driven around the place (see Figures 7 and 8). This performance is watched by the bereaved, the other guests and a big group of spectators. The group is welcomed via microphone by a moderator, and the sums of money and number and types of gift zebras announced. Afterwards, even people who did not attend the party know about the amount of cattle gifts – at least in the form of rumor.

The funerary gift-giving is shaped, and its dynamics driven by social competition and bargaining for social esteem or warding off public humiliation and losing face:

“Funeral is competition.” [46:46, male, age: 42]

As a consequence, many gifts are of much higher value than the traditional social obligations demand. Regardless of age and gender, the vast majority of interviewees assessed the development of increasing funeral expenditures as bad:

“[It is] bad, I would prefer following the old custom. Today, it’s a kind of suicide.” [203:15, male, age: around 30]

At the same time, most of them felt helpless and trapped in the mechanisms of social obligation and public pressure:

“The people just follow this blindly, they can’t avoid it, but the truth is that they hate it.”

[155:44, male, age: 67]



Figure 7: Zebu gift driven through the dancing ground at a funeral party in the Mahafaly Plateau region (own picture, 2013)



Figure 8: Gifts in form of money (in a plastic bag), fabrics and cooking pot displayed at a funeral party in the Mahafaly Plateau region (own picture, 2013)

#### 4.3.1. Constellation of actors

The main actors involved in gift-giving at a funeral party are the male organizers, the male ‘guests’, the male guests’ wives and daughters, as well as the spectators (see Figure 9 - Constellation of Actors). 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. In reported cases this group consisted of up to 14 people. The role of a ‘guest’ is defined by being personally invited to the party and consequently bringing a gift. Guests bringing a gift zebu have a specific role and outstanding importance – interviewees asked how many guests they estimated to attend often only counted the ones expected to bring a zebu. Every guest may bring relatives (e.g. a wife) or friends to spend the time with. In reported cases, this group consisted of up to 30 people. These companions have no gift duties themselves, however today often contribute to the guest’s gift or bring their own gift, especially if they are very close male relatives of the guest (e.g. brothers). Invited guests are mostly affines and good friends.

The most important guests and also most important actors in the dynamics of gift-giving are the organizers’ (ex-)sons-in-law, followed by the organizers’ (ex-)fathers-in-law. Also the organizers’ daughters and wives are relevant actors, as well as the group of affines of the same role, e.g. the group of all sons-in-law (cf. Fee 2000). This group, called *mpirahamba* or *mpiravetro*, is the reference for one’s gift performance and consequently the actor one may compete with. According to older interviewees, the number of a person’s (ex-)affines has risen over the last



decades (see Figure 9 - Environment) due to changing partners more often, a rise of polygyny with up to four wives, marrying younger, and having more children (reported up to 15 per woman). The other guests are attached to the organizers by friendship, or a different kind of affinity and kinship than those described. Clan- and lineage-kinship plays a role in many aspects of social life, but is of comparatively minor importance in funerary gift-giving.

As all funeral parties take place publicly, a lot of people are present at the event without being organizers, guests or guests' companions. They are not in any formal relationship with the organizers and guests, and do not give gifts or receive food from the organizers, but stroll around, purchase drinks and food, dance and watch the presentation of gifts. This group comprising up to several hundred people from the neighboring villages has a crucial role in the constellation of actors through chatting about the quality of the party and gifts. It is the group of spectators that creates public opinion, social pressure and social humiliation (see Figure 9 - Constellation of Actors).

#### **4.3.2. Bargaining power**

Grounded in his power to create 'fame or shame' by positive or negative gossip, the actor 'mass of spectators' has high bargaining power (see Figure 9 - Bargaining Power). The spectators' main interest is to be entertained and watching 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 positive feedback from the mass, or at least for not getting negative feedback. The power of the 'mass' has increased over time with funeral parties having become socially more important with more and more spectators being present.

Bargaining for social esteem is done by trying to bring the most valuable or most interesting gift at the entire party or at least trying to top the gifts of the other men of the same group of affines – what the others will bring is often communicated directly beforehand or heard by rumor. Bargaining for respect and acceptance from the side of the gift-receiving kin, and especially one's parents-in-law, however, is a comparatively minor issue and interviewees were very clear about the point that most positive or negative feedback about a gift does not come from the gift-receivers themselves but from the spectators. Many people seemed to be rather relaxed when it comes to claiming the fulfilment of gift duties, which is also mirrored in many people's interpretation of these duties, as described below. Furthermore, aiming for ancestral blessing through valuable gifts or another link between gift-giving and the world of the ancestors was rarely stated.

The competition for virtuous gifts and famous parties was described by interviewees with the term *rengerenge* which implies ostentation or boasting (cf. Fee 2000, Middleton 1988) and a competition for 'being heavy', the local term for having high social status in the society. This phenomenon is said to be rather new. Consequently, as "today, the daughters want to be heavy<sup>8</sup>" [93:12, male, age: 24], the younger women are said to no longer let their invited fathers decide on gifts for their inviting husbands, but force their fathers to bring specific ones of high social and symbolic value.

#### 4.3.3. Ideology: Spheres of exchange, perceptions of gift-giving and wealth

The people in the study region in general keep the traditional spheres of exchange in funerary gift-giving (see Figure 9 - Ideology): Although for decades now the traditional livestock-gift has been complemented by money (*basimena*) and more recently also by consumer stuff, zebu gifts are still the only gifts of 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 – zebras. Money-gifts are normally comparatively small sums starting at 5,000 MGA<sup>9</sup>, although they can amount to more than 2 million MGA<sup>10</sup> per party.

In general, the socio-cultural and economic value of zebras differ greatly depending on parameters such as sex and age classes, body conditions, and especially beauty in terms of color and the shape of horns:

"When a father-in-law brings only a small zebu or a zebu with ugly horns, people may gossip that he is a very bad father-in-law." [191:49, male, age: 60]

The value of consumer stuff-gifts is defined by their practicability, novelty and range among the list-dependent status symbols which consist of complete living room sets at the top, followed by hard wood furniture (especially bed-frames), foam mattresses, sewing machines, suitcases and plastic chairs. Also kitchen utilities, clothes and blankets are typical of today's gifts. While some of the exchanged items are themselves quite a novelty in the region (see Figure 9 - Technology), others only newly appear within the set of gifts, for example ox carts (see Figure 9 - Ideology). 'Introducing' an item as a funeral gift can bring the gift-giver regional prominence and fame. New types of gifts were a heavily discussed development by interviewees and perceived as a major change in the traditional funerary customs.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ty anake ampela mba te-havesatse.*

<sup>9</sup> Starting at 1.3 US\$

<sup>10</sup> More than 515 US\$

Within the set of local ideologies, it is crucial to clarify if the recent current gift-giving is seen as part of the local custom. The understanding of 'custom' (*fomba*) not only embraces specific traditions such as ceremonies, but also a common pattern of behavior or activities, e.g. 'doing agriculture'. *Fomba* are mostly seen as something one should or must follow (cf. Middleton 1999b). Consequently, during interviews people often declared *fomba* as (more or less) equivalent with a *lily* (rule, command). The current funeral ceremonies in general were perceived by most interviewees as still being the ancestral custom (*fomban-draza*), while bringing many presents or giving a party with a music band was mostly declared as being a 'new custom' or even 'new rule'.

Interviewees described customs and rules as things that easily transform over time, become 'forgotten' or 'out of fashion'. In the same way, it was often argued that the custom of organizing funeral parties and bringing many gifts was 'copied' from a neighboring ethnic group or 'just invented by us'. The question if, among the Tanalana, such a 'new custom' or custom's adaptation had to be somehow morally permitted by the Tanalana clan's or lineage's moral authority<sup>11</sup> (*mpitan-kazomanga*), was denied.

The transformed ancestor-related or new custom then becomes the 'right thing to do'. Accordingly, only very few older interviewees displayed another mental model arguing that the today's gift-giving and funeral parties are not the traditional custom and thus not the correct way<sup>12</sup> (see Figure 9 - Ideology). Younger people were often not even aware that the funeral parties and the importance of gift-giving are a quite recent phenomenon. On interviewing 19 persons of an age between 15 and 25, it turned out that most of them had nearly no knowledge of funeral customs in the past and eventual changes.

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 (*hakeo*). 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* (or *fihavanana*). This crucial value in Malagasy social life (see Figure 9 - Ideology) embraces meanings of kinship, reciprocity, solidarity, and social harmony and has to be especially carefully kept towards one's group of *longo*, that is, all relatives and friends. The different degrees and characteristics of *filongoa* translate into customs with specific rules defining which kind of gift is considered appropriate (cf. Cole & Middleton 2001, Fee 2000). Gift-giving is also a sign of economic solidarity with the

---

<sup>11</sup> Among the mere Mahafaly-people, such an authority does not exist.

<sup>12</sup> However, many elders stated to feel some kind of amazement about the changes: "[...] the today's customs are amazing for us." [30:37, female, age: around 70].

bereaved who face the burden of organizing a party. However, once the rule is fulfilled, additional gift-giving was said to not further positively influence the relationship between gift-giver and receiver and not perceived as a sign of generosity and solidarity. Giving more than the expected value was mainly declared as being only driven by the aim to get fame (*laza*), pride (*rehareha*), and honor (*voninahitse*). In the contemporary local understanding, these concepts are directly and necessarily related to economic means (see Figure 9 - Ideology):

“Here, honor is the same as pride and this is related to wealth. [...No,] having an important job or being educated cannot mean pride if you are not rich, that’s nonsense.” [4:141, female, age: 50]

On the other side of displaying wealth by one’s high ability to give, revealing poverty, as in the case of not being economically able to bring the expected gift, is per se shameful. Shame (*henatse*) related to poverty is an important aspect of social life and often intertwined with gossip and public humiliation. Without presenting a contradiction, personal poorness was interpreted as being a consequence of laziness or another kind of personal behavior, but also ‘bad luck’, ‘destiny’, or ‘God’s will’ (cf. Delcroix & Fauroux 1994, Middleton 2009). During interviews, laziness or ‘unwillingness to at least try’ was the most often commented negatively connoted personal character (cf. Feeley-Harnik 1984).

#### 4.3.4. Institutions and their interpretation

Gift-giving obligations are most sharply defined by rules for men and their fathers-in-law as the ‘wife-givers’ who command the highest respect. In the context of funerary condolence visits, the fathers-in-law should traditionally receive one zebu. While some interviewees insisted that it should be a big castrated (*zebu vositse*) and thus very valuable one, others declared the value of the zebu as being irrelevant. The duty of bringing a zebu to fathers-in-law is supported by the narrative that in the past and also today, the parents-in-law have the right to take their daughter back and marry her to another man if the son-in-law does not bring a zebu<sup>13</sup> (see Figure 9 - Ideology). Today, the common gift pattern is to give the father-in-law two zebras or a zebu plus quite an amount of money (see Figure 9 - Institutions).

Besides a certain personal kinship relationship, gift obligations may also exist due to an institutionalized specific invitation and rules on counter-gift-giving (see Figure 9 - Institutions). The oral invitation to the party may include a standardized expression making clear that one expects the guests to bring a zebu (*manam’bvara [aomby]*). Most interviewees felt that this

---

<sup>13</sup> Called *sitoane*, *sintonene i ananey* or *sinintone*.

zebu-requesting invitation is a severe social duty one is forced to fulfil even if it is economically hard. Alternatively, the expression *mitalily* is used to indicate that the guest has a free choice of gift or, according to other interviewees' perceptions, that he should bring some money. Counter-gift-giving applies to all the inviter-guest constellations wherein the current guest has in the past received a gift from the current organizer during a funeral party organized by him. In this case, the traditional social norm of reciprocal gift-giving (*kivaleo*) demands that the counter-gift should be of the same type (money, goat, sheep, or zebu) and of same or higher monetary value, or respective age class of animal.

Despite the existence of numerous customs or rules on gift-giving, many interviewees perceived gift-giving as a voluntary act or at least the choice of the gift as a free decision. 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, views were divided as to whether every gift beyond the first zebu is 'just on top' or if 'at least one (castrated) zebu plus extras' in form of livestock, money, or items represents the new obligation. Other interviewees insisted that a (castrated) zebu is the common gift, albeit 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:

*"Lily (rules) and fomba (customs) are the same [...and] you are not obliged to do the fomba."* [190:38, male, age: 38]

The indispensability of rules was also called into question and many interviewees insisted on an economic exit-option and abrogated duty conditional to poor economic conditions of the gift-giver (see Figure 9 - Institutions). This was not only explained by empathic comprehension of the gift-giver's situation, but as being an elementary part of the rule:

*"The castrated zebu is the rule, but it's also the rule that people don't bring it if they can't afford it."* [203:13, female, age: around 30]

Similarly, also the rule of reciprocal gift-giving was perceived by some interviewees as applying only if the economic situation of the guest allows for it. The economically induced exit-option of many customs however comes with a duty to 'rectify' or make up for the custom's fulfilment once the economic situation allows for it. Thus, a man in economic trouble may opt to not bestow a zebu on his father-in-law on the date of the funeral party (or., e.g., a wedding), but hand it in later.

#### 4.3.5. Changes in distributional effects and relative prices

The perceived 'livestock crisis' and ongoing market integration have caused a shift in relative prices of livestock versus money and consumer stuff, with relative prices for bringing a livestock-gift having increased (see Figure 9 - Relative Prices). Loaning money or gift animals from somebody in the village is very common but becoming increasingly difficult due to a lack of willing loaners. Typical activities to afford the needed gift-animals are paid cowboy work, paid field work and the production of charcoal for sale. As an illustration of these relative prices, a 2-3 year old zebu (200,000-350,000 MGA<sup>14</sup>) corresponds to the salary of one year of cowboy work, while the cost of a goat of 20,000 MGA<sup>15</sup> may be earned in 20 days of salaried field work (SuLaMa 2011) or around 48 days of charcoal making (Neudert et al. 2013).

Regarding the distribution of the gifts on an individual level, livestock is without saying directed towards the male organizers and commodities are exclusively for their wives, while money is meant to be shared between the couple.

Although Middleton states that people in South-West Madagascar could generate wealth by "careful management of their mortuary exchanges" (Middleton 1999c:233), the recent funerary gift-giving in the study region has high and most importantly unforeseeable distributional effects for both gift-donors as well as gift-receivers (see Figure 9 - Distributional Effects). A party organizer may be directly impoverished if the gifts do not suffice to cover his expenses. However, purposefully matching the expenditures or even calculating the generation of a surplus by higher gift-incomes than funeral expenses versus gift-incomes on the side of party organizers in order to generate a surplus is tricky as gift-incomes can only be roughly estimated. Most interviewees anyway struggled with the idea of such purposeful acting instead of 'just doing what has to be done'.

Furthermore, even if a funeral organizer may in the short run gain wealth by organizing the party, the corresponding counter-gift-giving still present an economic risk: Most people are not wealthy enough to foresee that they will be able to 'pay' the received gifts 'back'. Depending on when deaths occur in the families of the current gift-givers, it may take many years till all duties arising from the present party are fulfilled. At the same time, people's livestock capital varies greatly over the years as animals are frequently sold to obtain cash, die or give birth. This risk on the side of the organizers has increased over time as the value of gifts received has risen, both in terms of value per guest group as well as per party.

---

<sup>14</sup> 51 - 90 US\$

<sup>15</sup> 5.1 US\$

On the side of the guests, in general, fulfilling the rising gift duties can become a big economic challenge, especially for couples with a broad web of kin and thus the risk of getting many party invitations per year. The accumulated duty and overall frequency of counter-gift-giving has increased over time as today one is more often invited to parties by people with whom one has no close relationship. For example, one interviewee had to attend seven parties in the 2012 season, each implying one zebu as a counter-gift. In a nutshell, gift-giving in terms of negative reciprocity (Sahlins 1965) is merely impossible and maximizing one's own economic interest is a very risky game.

On the broader societal level, although the custom of counter gift-giving entrains a certain never-ending circulation of goods in the form of livestock, a big share of the capital is in several ways 'lost' through consumption or shifting out of the region: Part of the money and livestock-gifts are transformed into goats served as food during the party. This is however not a new situation, as formerly all given livestock including zebras were directly slaughtered. Another big share of these gifts is used to pay off the drinks bought in town and the services of the regional, but also non-regional music bands.

#### **4.3.6. Individual behavior**

The gift-giving system, and especially its rules on counter gift-giving, entrains that at the party, the attention of most guests is often very much focused on the gift-giving, while the person to be mourned moves into the background:

“The grandchildren [descendants of the death] regard the dead person. But all other guests look at those who invited them, as they will get the gift back in future when there is a problem [funeral] with them.” [188:37, female, age: 40]

As a further illustration, interviewed party spectators and guests did sometimes not know the name or who the bereaved was, but only who had organized the party. The importance of economic considerations and specifically those of counter-gift-giving on individual behavior is also mirrored on the side of potential party organizers: In the few reported cases where the bereaved opted for not organizing a party, the main reason was fear of economic difficulties due to long-run counter-gift-giving.

The previous example, though, also shows that besides all common patterns and the underlying customs and rules, the gift-giving behavior is to a differing degree also individualized and then highly shaped by personal strategies and preferences, or personal pro-social norms. This is demonstrated by the fact that although a zebu and in the best case a relatively old castrated

one (up to 1,200,000 MGA<sup>16</sup> on local markets) is the most appropriate and therefore theoretically most typical gift, at the observed funerals also very young zebras of low market value (15,000 - 50,000 MGA<sup>17</sup>) as well as goats and sheep of different sizes (5,000 - 130,000 MGA<sup>18</sup>) and other items were given away. Accordingly, while some interviewed people said to try everything possible to get the required zebu by loaning or selling their belongings, others declared to 'just bring what I can find at the moment' – may it be an animal, some fabric or money. Sometimes people even opted to avoid the expenditure by not attending the funeral at all (see Figure 9 - Individual Behavior).

These 'objectors' who do not follow a strategy of taking part in the competition nor of fulfilling the new gift-duties cannot be classified by parameters such as economic prosperity, age, or religion (traditional versus Christian belief). Here, the personal degree of sensibility towards public rumors and thus level of social conformity matters – against the background of diverging interpretations on the indispensability to fulfil the social obligations. Further personal strategies center on the parents' wish to use the funeral party for providing their daughters with some economic security, as these are by tradition excluded from all livestock inheritance and thus most capital. Therefore, men give their sons-in-law not only animals, but also much money and commodities meant to be for their daughters.

The gift-giving system also leaves room for individual decision-making on the side of the organizers. For example, some organizers use the liberty that it is up to them to decide which gift-entraining invitation they give to whom to deliberately give free-choice-invitations to poor guests. By contrast, other organizers invite even poor friends in the common zebu-demanding way. Organizers sometimes also opt to invite their poor son-in-law in the zebu-demanding way as tradition demands, but before the party they hand over a zebu to him in private so that he can publicly give this away during the party and so save his face.

Disregard the motivations of an individual to spend a lot on gifts or party organization, on the societal level, the accumulated behavior entrains a positive feed back loop on the relative price of getting fame or avoiding shame: The more 'giving a lot' becomes normal, the more is needed to invest to avoid shame or even gain fame. It also feeds back in a negative form on the social value attached on the traditional gift of a zebu, making it just the gift 'basis' which has to be complemented by additional gifts.

---

<sup>16</sup> 310 US\$

<sup>17</sup> 3.85 - 13 US\$

<sup>18</sup> 1.3 - 33.5 US\$



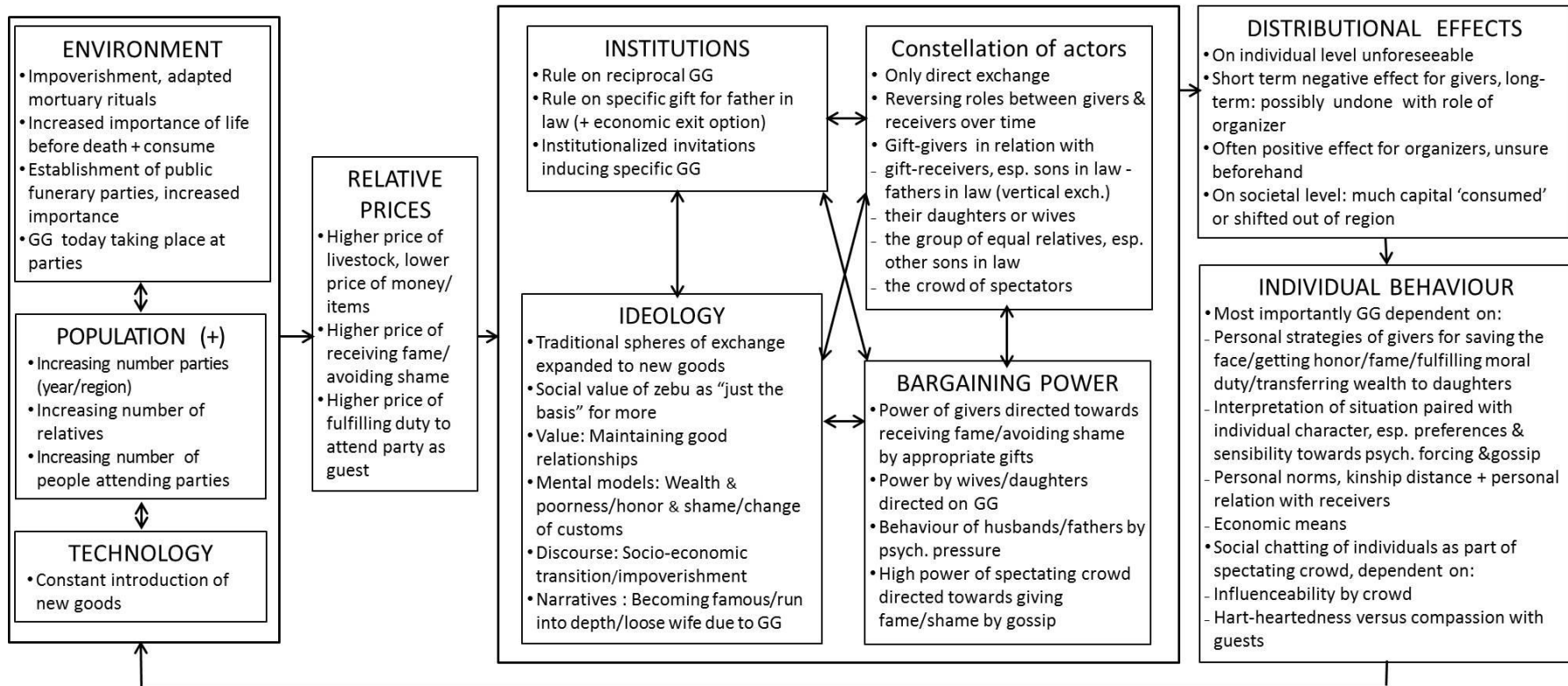


Figure 7: Changes in funeral gift-giving (GG) and their interplay among people in the study region

## 5. Discussion

In the previous chapter, I described the contemporary system of funerary gift-giving in the study region, its dynamics of the last 15 years, and its socio-economic, cultural and ideological context. In the following section, I will discuss some analogies and many differences to gift-giving findings from theory and from other developing regions, especially in Madagascar.

In Madagascar, first of all, the main determinant of ritual-related behavior such as funerary gift-giving is mostly said to be a fear of ancestral wrath, misfortune and moral blame from the ancestors, entraining shame and losing face (Bloch 2010, Burgess 1932, Cole & Middleton 2001, Fee 2000, Graeber 2007). This fear and the underlying logic are however not of relevance in the present case. Contrastingly, the current gift-giving in the study region is mainly driven by the fear of public gossip and social humiliation ruining one's societal standing. The contemporary funerals and gift-giving do not classify into "exchange of services between the community of the living and that of the dead" (Hertz 1960:61), but present a transformation of wealth into the maintenance or increase of social status similar to Mauss' 'struggle of wealth' (Mauss 1923), whereas other Malagasy rituals can be described as the "transformation of wealth into sanctity" (Lambek 2008:148).

Concerning the status and flexibility of customs and the attached ritualized behavior, Malagasy people are mostly said to present a quite uniform behavior. They would be nearly blindly driven by the aim of avoiding moral blame and receiving ancestral blessing by 'fulfilling the custom', but having no "idea why they act in the way they do" (Astuti & Bloch 2013:109). In the present case, in turn, 'fulfilling the customs' is indeed important, but at the same time people's understanding of the nature of customs allow that non-custom-conform, 'new' behavior easily 'becomes the new custom' when massively observed. Strong references to social continuity or an old custom as reasons to socially sanction the new one (cf. Hobsbawm 1983) are only of minor relevance here.

Consistent with the described flexibility of customs, the case study shows that while new behaviors of gift-giving have become institutionalized, there is still room for personal decision-making and reflection. Even in this highly ceremonial environment of a funeral, people's behavior is individual and largely shaped by varying personal aspirations, preferences, choices, and calculations – a fact also stated in gift-giving theory (Befu 1977). This individual behavior is sustained by the nature of the relevant traditional rules which per se include several options of behavior according to a person's economic situation.

Studies for Madagascar in general or from other regions define Malagasy societies as leveling and collectivist, with people always intending to not perform better than the rest for fear of causing envy, "the archetypical Malagasy vice" (Graeber 2007:212, also see Fee 2000, Hoerner 1990, Rasamoelina

2006). In contrast, the very few other studies from the South-West of Madagascar describe a similar public competition for societal standing and ostentation (Astuti 1994, Middleton 1988, 2009). However, the case also shows some interesting differences to the descriptions of gift-giving among the Karimbola-Mahafaly-people in the 1980s (Middleton 1988). There, the gift-givers tried to gain social esteem at the expense of the gift-receivers or other gift-givers from the same group of affines. While in today's regional language, *mpirahamba* and *mpiravetro* are synonyms for the groups of affines, Middleton (1988) describes *mpirahamba* and *mpiravetro* as two groups differing in the character of competitive gift-giving: While *mpiravetro*-relationships were characterized by unrestrained hostility, the people of *mpirahamba* were fighting "rank within a bounded system" wherein "questions of honor [were] conducted in predetermined codes" (Middleton 1988:134,135).

Furthermore, today humiliation does not mostly take place within these rivaling groups, but it is the spectators as a rather undefined group humiliating individual gift-bringers. Also, while Cole & Middleton (2001:27) found funerals among the Mahafaly-Karembola to be "times when people 'command' (*mandily*) one another, when people must submit, times when bonds between people are broken or restored", results show that today, these commanded gift-duties and the relationship between gift-giver and -receiver mostly play a minor role in people's decision which gift to bring, compared to the factor of public pressure. Analogously, the organizers' daughters and their reaction to the public pressure have started to play a crucial role in gift-giving, whereas in the 1980s they did not have a stake at all (Middleton 1988).

In a nutshell, the contemporary gift-giving in the study region is agonistic on a very personal level, but people do not behave in a ritualized aggressive way or within very fixed roles and ritual relationships. This personalization in agonism may correspond to the described socio-cultural shift towards more individualism and a higher value of present social and economic life in comparison to life after death.

For developing countries in general, gift-giving is shaped by discussions on its socio-economic rationale. Gift-giving systems are often claimed to provide household security and disaster relief for those most in need (Baird & Gray 2014, Platteau 2006). Individuals dealing with economic difficulties can claim assistance from their kinship network in a way of "sharing without reckoning" (Fortes (1969) cited in Di Falco & Bulte (2011:1129). Since Evans-Pritchard's descriptions of circulation of livestock among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940), this pro-social argumentation is particularly dominant for pastoral societies (e.g., Niamir-Fuller & Turner 1999). However, rather recent studies have also found that the underlying socio-economic and ideological idea of such transfer systems is often not – or not anymore – reflected in the actual behavior of the participants (e.g., Bollig 1998, Moritz 2013). Correspondingly, also in the study area the gift-giving – though it has a traditional ideological meaning

of solidarity with the ones in need – de facto entails an economic burden and heavy risk for the bereaved.

Furthermore, all gift-transfers are typically reckoned in several ways by all involved individuals and groups, thus ‘sharing without reckoning’ is an exception. Most importantly, the gift-giving is heavily shaped by the widespread rule of counter-gift-giving (cf. Bourdieu 1990, Mauss 1923) which not only translates into a relationship of debt between gift donor and receiver, but on the level of the accumulated gift-giving duty of a person can mean a heavy economic burden and risk. The gift-giving system is thus the opposite of the often-described traditional ‘social security economies’. Also, the gift-capital mostly not only ‘circulates’ between different regional actors but is in diverse ways consumed or shifted out of the region.

Concerning the robustness of such originally pro-social traditional institutions, many gift-giving systems around the world have been found to erode in line with development and market integration (Platteau 2006). This is especially true for gift-giving with a rationale of social justice, leveling, and solidarity. Here, it is often the younger generations which are less generous and in this way change the tradition step-by-step (e.g. Ensminger 1992). The presented case portrays a different development (cf. Middleton 1999) as the younger people, namely the younger women, are a main driver of the dynamics of giving more and more precious gifts away, however with a rationale of boasting instead of solidarity.

Scholars looking explicitly at Africa have found that such originally pro-social institutions only persist if they can be adapted and instrumentalized by those with power so as to gain their own economic advantage (cf. Ensminger 1992, Haller 2002a). In the presented case, however, it is impossible to explain the general development of more and more competition and growing gifts just by the bargaining behavior of specific actors, for example the younger women or the rich ones who are able to boast without economic difficulty. Without the approval and stimulation by the judging masses, the innovative behavior could not have become the ‘new custom’. At the same time, these masses are – if directly asked about it – very aware that this development has brought additional economic and social risk to them. The case study again demonstrates how the aggregated changes in individual people’s behavior work as ‘clusters of self-fulfilling expectations’ (Schelling 1966) which institutionalize themselves.

The dynamics of increasing societal competition and boasting resembles observations made by Nicolas (1968) for the 1950s and 1960s in several parts of Africa. He found that gift-giving had been becoming “increasingly subject to agonistic and ostentatious considerations, less and less governed by the principle of reciprocity, and where the purely quantitative monetary value of the offered wealth is increasingly replacing its symbolic value” (Nicolas 1968:241, own translation). Similarly, for Melanesia,

Gregory (1989:117) described an “efflorescence of gift-exchange” induced by colonialization, with the character of “a transition of fighting with weapons to fighting with gifts” which are “the results of obligations imposed on people struggling to achieve status and wealth.”

The description of such an agonistic gift-giving behavior with bargaining for fame, pride and status demonstrates that agonistic gift-giving systems are today not only as rare as often assumed (cf. Godelier 2004) but also show opposite, or at least different, dynamics than non-agonistic ones. Though, the presented case also demonstrates some dissimilarities to many well-known agonistic systems of the past. Regarding its relatively low degree of hostility and aggressiveness, for example, the case shows crucial differences with the very agonistic famous former gift-giving rituals of potlatch on the North American North-West coast and the Kula-ring in Papua New Guinea (Rosman & Rubel 1971, Sahlins 1965). Furthermore, the case study demonstrates that gift-giving does not, as often stated, only or mostly prevail or even flourish in societies or groups with very strong patron-client relationships and systems of vertical exchange, e.g. the well-known big men-societies described by Sahlins (1963).

Regarding gift-giving theory, the case study reveals that some main elements of classical theory as well as modern approaches may be of less relevance in practice, while others may get too little attention. For illustration, theory centers on the personal relationship between donor and recipient – the classical theory mostly with a focus on reciprocity and gift-giving as a ‘debt economy’ (Mauss 1923, Bourdieu 1990). In the case study, reciprocity is indeed one of the ideological foundations and the analysis has revealed the importance of deeply analyzing the relationship between donor and recipient. However, the described dynamics in the gift-giving system as a whole mostly take place outside of this relationship. The spectating crowd as representative of the local society is an important actor outside the typical two-sided-relationship. This suggests, paired with the described high individualization in gift-giving behavior, that the importance of kinship classically defining ‘who gives what to whom’ may be overemphasized – at least when it comes to modern agonistic systems. Consequently, focusing the analysis of institutions on those related to reciprocity and kinship relations may be misleading.

Also personal norms and social norms of a more general societal level must be considered. For case study analysis, it is therefore helpful to combine gift-giving theory with further approaches. In the present case, the chosen economic-anthropological framework on institutional change (Ensminger 1992) made it possible to open up the focus of gift-giving theory on donor-recipient relations towards structures both on the higher societal, but also on the more individual level. It also facilitated embedding the gift-giving act itself into the comprehensive cultural and socio-economic picture of the actual system, its traditional foundation, and the in-between parameters of change which are not represented in classical gift-giving theory.

## 6. Conclusion

The case study of contemporary funerary gift-giving and attached ceremonies in a rural region in South-West Madagascar demonstrates how a long-standing gift-giving system in a rather traditional society of the developing world changes continuously and is influenced by individualization, consumerism, market integration, and changes of ideological values attached to life and death. Social pressure, mostly created by gift-giving directly translating into societal 'fame or shame', paired with the accumulated gossip of people not directly involved, levers out the explicit traditional rules on gift-giving with their pro-social economic-exit options. Reverse to the originally underlying rationale of economic solidarity with the bereaved, gift-giving today presents a societal and economic threat to all involved actors. The case allows new insights to our common understanding of gift-giving systems and customs and opposed some former writings. It presents a 21<sup>st</sup> century example of an individualized and agonistic gift-giving system which is not declining but rather is on the rise in terms of societal and socio-economic importance.

## References

- Astuti, Rita. 1994. "Invisible objects: mortuary rituals among the Vezo of western Madagascar." *Res: anthropology and aesthetics* no. 25:111-121. doi: 10.1086/resv25n1ms20166894.
- Astuti, Rita, and Maurice Bloch. 2013. "Are ancestors dead?" In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*, edited by Janice Boddy and Michael Lambek, 103-117. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
- Baird, Timothy D., and Clark L. Gray. 2014. "Livelihood Diversification and Shifting Social Networks of Exchange: A Social Network Transition?" *World Development* no. 60:14-30. doi: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2014.02.002.
- Battistini, Rene. 1964. *Géographie humaine de la plaine côtière mahafaly*. Paris: Éditions Cujas.
- Befu, Harumi. 1977. "Social Exchange." *Annual Reviews in Anthropology* no. 6 (1):255-281. doi: 10.1146/annurev.an.06.100177.001351.
- Berking, Helmuth. 1999. *Sociology of giving*. London: SAGE.
- Bicchieri, Christine. 2006. *The Grammar of Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bloch, Maurice. 1989. "The symbolism of money in Imerina." In *Money and the morality of exchange*, edited by Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch, 165-190. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2010. "Zafimaniry debt and credit." In *La cohérence des sociétés. Mélanges en hommage à Daniel de Coppet*, edited by André Iteanu, 235-246. Paris: Fondation de la Maison des sciences de l'homme.
- Bollig, Michael. 1998. "Moral Economy and Self-interest: Kinship, Friendship, and Exchange among the Pokot (N.W. Kenya)." In *Kinship, Networks, and Exchange*, edited by Schweizer Thomas and Douglas R. White, 137-157. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Burgess, Andrew. 1932. *Zanahary in South Madagascar*. Minneapolis: The Board of Foreign Missions.
- Cole, Jennifer, and Karen Middleton. 2011. "Rethinking Ancestors and Colonial Power in Madagascar." *Africa* no. 71 (01):1-37. doi: 10.3366/afr.2001.71.1.1.
- Decary, Raymond. 1951. *Moeurs et coutumes des Malgaches*. Paris: Payot.
- . 1962. *La mort et les coutumes funéraires à Madagascar*. Paris: G.P. Maisonneuve et Larose.
- Delcroix, Fancoise, and Emmanuel Fauroux. 1994. "Les racines ceremonielles du clientelisme et du pouvoir local dans les villages sakalava du Menabe." *Omalasy ny Anio* no. 33-36:213-222.
- Di Falco, Salvatore, and Erwin H. Bulte. 2011. "A Dark Side of Social Capital? Kinship, Consumption, and Savings." *Journal of Development Studies* no. 47 (8):1128-1151. doi: 10.1080/00220388.2010.514328.
- Dobuzinkis, Laurent. 2003. "Gift-giving and Reciprocity in the Global Era." In *Turbulence and New Directions in Global Political Economy*, edited by J. Busumtwi-Sam and Laurent Dobuzinkis, 107-125. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan.
- Drucker, Philip, and Robert F. Heizer. 1967. *To make my name good: a reexamination of the southern Kwakiutl potlatch*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Eisenstein, Charles. 2011. *Sacred economics: Money, gift, and society in the age of transition*. North Atlantic Books.
- Ensminger, Jean. 1992. *Making a market. The institutional transformation of an African society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1940. "The Nuer of the Southern Sudan." In *African Political Systems*, edited by M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 64-78. Oxford University Press.
- Evers, Sandra J.T.M. 2002. *Constructing History, Culture and Inequality*. African Studies ed. Vol. 4. Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill.
- Faublée, Jacques. 1954. *La Cohésion des sociétés Bara*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Fee, Sarah. 2000. "'Enga': Further descriptive notes on Tandroy funerary practices." In *L'extraordinaire et le quotidien*, edited by Claude Allibert and Narivelo Rajaonarimanana, 523-550. Paris: Karthala.
- Feeley-Harnik, Gillian. 1984. "The political economy of death: communication and change in Malagasy colonial history." *American Ethnologist* no. 11 (1):1-19. doi: 10.1525/ae.1984.11.1.02a00010.

- Fieloux, Michèle. 1987. "Une étude ethno-historique des impacts sociaux de la crise de l'élevage." In *L'équipe Madagascar. Une expérience de coopération, une équipe de recherche 1985-1987*, edited by ORSTOM, 67-68. Paris: ORSTOM.
- Frère, Suzanne. 1958. *Madagascar. Panorama de l'Androy*. Paris: Société continentale d'éditions modernes illustrées.
- Godelier, Maurice. 2004. "What Mauss did not say: Things you give, things you sell, and things that must be kept." In *Values and Valuables: From the Sacred to the Symbolic*, edited by Cynthia Werner and Duran Bell, 3-20. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.
- Graeber, David. 2007. *Lost people: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Gregory, Chris A. 1980. "Gifts to Men and Gifts to God: Gift Exchange and Capital Accumulation in Contemporary Papua." *Man* no. 15 (4):626-652. doi: 10.2307/2801537.
- Gregory, Chris A. . 1989. "Gifts." In *Social Economics*, edited by J. Eatwell and et al., 109-118. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Haller, Tobias. 2002. "Common Property Resource Management, Institutional Change and Conflicts in African Floodplain Wetlands." *The African Anthropologist* no. 9 (1). doi: 10.4314/aa.v9i1.23068.
- . 2010. *Disputing the Floodplains. Institutional Change and the Politics of Resource Management in African Wetlands*. Leiden: Brill.
- Hänke, Hendrik, and Jan Barkmann. 2017. "Insurance Funtion of Livestock: Farmer's Coping Capacity with Regional Droughts in South-Western Madagascar." *World Development* no. 96:264-275. doi: doi:10.4314/aa.v9i1.23068.
- Heal, Felicity. 2014. *The Power of Gifts: Gift Exchange in Early Modern England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heurtebize, Georges. 1997. *Mariage et deuil dans l'extreme-Sud de Madagascar*. Paris, Canda: L'Harmattan.
- Huntington, W. R. 1973. "Death and the social order: Bara funeral customs (Madagascar)." *African Studies* no. 32 (2):65-84. doi: 10.1080/00020187308707398.
- Jaovelo-Dzao, Robert. 1996. *Mythes, rites et trances à Madagascar. Angano, Joro et Tromba Sakalava*. Paris, Antananarivo: Karthala.
- Kaufmann, Jeffrey C. 2011. "Doubting Modernity for Madagascar's Cactus Pastoralists." *History in Africa* no. 38:123-151. doi: 10.1353/hia.2011.0016.
- Kaufmann, Jeffrey C., and Sylvestre Tsirahamba. 2006. "Forests and Thorns: Conditions of Change Affecting Mahafale Pastoralists in Southwestern Madagascar." *Conservation and Society* no. 4 (2):231-261.
- Lambek, Michael. 2008. "Value and Virtue." *Anthropological Theory* no. 8 (2):133-157. doi: 10.1177/1463499608090788.
- Mack, John. 1986. *Madagascar. Island of the Ancestors*. London: The Trustees of the British Museum.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1923. "Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques." *L'Année Sociologique* no. 1:30-186.
- Middleton, Karen. 1988. *Marriages and Funerals: Some Aspects of Karembola Political Symbolism (Madagascar)*. D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford.
- . 1999a. "Introduction." In *Ancestors, Power and History in Madagascar*, edited by Karen Middleton, 1-36. Leiden: Brill.
- . 1999b. "Tombs, Umbilical cords, and the Syllable Fo." In *Cultures of Madagascar: Ebb and flow of influences*, edited by Sandra Evers and Marc Spindler, 223-235. International Institute for Asian Studies.
- . 2009. "From Ratsiraka to Ravalomanana. Changing Narratives of Prickly Pears in Dryland Madagascar." *Études océan Indien* no. 42-43:47-83. doi: 10.4000/oceanindien.729.
- Minowa, Y., O. Khomenko, and R. W. Belk. 2010. "Social Change and Gendered Gift-Giving Rituals: A Historical Analysis of Valentine's Day in Japan." *Journal of Macromarketing* no. 31 (1):44-56. doi: 10.1177/0276146710375831.



- Moritz, Mark. 2013. "Livestock Transfers, Risk Management, and Human Careers in a West African Pastoral System." *Human Ecology* no. 41 (2):205-219. doi: 10.1007/s10745-012-9546-8.
- Neudert, Regina, Johanna Friederike Goetter, Jessica Andriamparany, and Miandrano Rakotoarisoa. 2015. "Income diversification, wealth, education and wellbeing in rural south-western Madagascar: Results from the Mahafaly Region." *Development Southern Africa*:1-27. doi: 10.1080/0376835x.2015.1063982.
- Neudert, Regina, Frank Wätzold, Henintsoa Randrianarison, and Johanna Friederike Goetter. 2013. Foregone benefits of reducing deforestation in south-western Madagascar. Poster presented at the 10th biennial conference of the European Society for Ecological Economics, Lille, France, 18-21 June 2013.
- Niamir-Fuller, Maryam, and Matthew D. Turner. 1999. "A review of recent literature on pastoralism and transhumance in Africa." In *Managing mobility in African Rangelands. The legitimization of transhumance*, 18-45. Intermediate Technology Publications
- Nicolas, Guy. 1968. "La société africaine et ses réactions à l'impact occidental." In *L'Afrique Noire Contemporaine*, edited by Marcel Merle, 178-251. Paris: Arman Colin.
- Pannoux, Stéphane. 1991. "Le tombeau Mahafale, lieu d'expression des enjeux sociaux : tradition et nouveauté." In *Aombe 3: Cohésion sociale, modernité et pression démographique: l'exemple du Mahafale*, edited by Manassé Esoavelomandroso.
- Platteau, Jean-Philippe. 2006. "Solidarity norms and institutions in village societies: Static and dynamic considerations." In *Handbook of the Economics of Giving, Altruism and Reciprocity (1)*, edited by Serge-Christophe Kolm and Jean Mercier Ythier, 820-882. Amsterdam: North Holland.
- Rosman, A., and P. G. Rubel. 1971. *Feasting with Mine Enemy: Rank and Exchange Among Northwest Coast Societies*. New York: Colombia University Press.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1963. "Poor man, rich man, big-man, chief: Political types in Melanesia and Polynesia." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* no. 5 (3):285-303.
- . 1965. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *The Relevance of Models for Social Anthropology*, edited by Michael Banton, 139-236. London: Tavistock.
- Schlüter, Achim, and Insa Theesfeld. 2010. "The grammar of institutions: The challenge of distinguishing between strategies, norms, and rules." *Rationality and Society* no. 22 (4):445-475. doi: 10.1177/1043463110377299.
- Schomerus-Gernböck, Lotte. 1971. "Les Mahafaly. Introduction à leur culture matérielle." *Taloha* no. 4:81-86.
- . 1981. *Die Mahafaly. Eine ethnische Gruppe im Süd-Westen Madagaskars*. Berlin: Reimer.
- Sherry, Jr John F. 1983. "Gift-giving in Anthropological Perspective." *Journal of Consumer Research* no. 10:157-168. doi: 10.1086/208956.
- SULAMA. 2011. Diagnostic participatif de la gestion des ressources naturelles sur le plateau Mahafaly, Commune Rurale de Beheloka - Toliara. Rapport Final. Toliara: SULAMA.
- Wood, Donald C. 2016. "Introduction: Anthropological Explorations of Incongruous Perspectives in the Economics of Ecology, Exchange, and Adaptation." In *The Economics of Ecology, Exchange, and Adaptation: Anthropological Explorations*, edited by Donald C. Wood, xiii-xxi. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Wüstefeld, Marzela. 2004. *Bedeutung der Rinder für die Ernährungssicherung im semiariden Süden Madagaskars*. Weikersheim: Margraf