
**THE *FAMAKIANA VOATAVO* RITUAL: A SOCIO-
ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF MORTALITY, ANCESTRAL
TABOOS, AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN ANTSIHANAKA**

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ABSTRACT

This research presents a comprehensive socio-anthropological analysis of the *Famakiana voatavo*—or "breaking of the pumpkin"—a culturally specific and clandestine ritual practiced within the Sihanaka community of the Antsihanaka region in Madagascar. While biological mortality is a universal constant, the management of terminal suffering among the Sihanaka involves a unique and paradoxical inversion of the human impulse to prolong life. Drawing on over fifteen years of longitudinal ethnographic field research (2007–2024), this study examines how the perceived metaphysical threat of a lingering elder, believed to be "consuming" the vitality of younger generations, leads families to sanction a terminal intervention. By utilizing a dual analytical lens, the study compares traditional ancestral hierarchies and communal solidarity with Christian eschatological hope and modern human rights frameworks. The investigation highlights a profound cultural dualism, where ritualized violence is often sustained by a "conspiracy of silence" despite its conflict with contemporary ethical standards. Furthermore, the work evaluates the Church's role in addressing these social pathologies through proactive engagement, pastoral accompaniment, and the promotion of unconditional grace. Ultimately, this research proposes transformative solutions for the education of "good citizens," advocating for an alternative social framework that protects the sanctity of life and fosters holistic communal development.

KEYWORDS: Mortality, *Famakiana voatavo*, Sihanaka culture, communal solidarity, ecclesiastical orthopraxy.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24). This existential cry, rooted in Pauline theology, haunts the collective consciousness of humanity, yet remains a question that many believe only Christ can truly answer. Death is an inescapable phenomenon that claims every living being under the sun, a reality defined in the Christian faith not by human agency, but by the sovereignty of the Creator. This perspective aligns with the biblical decree that humanity, fashioned from the earth, must inevitably return to it: "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). While the universal human impulse is to delay this finitude and aspire toward immortality, certain cultural contexts present startling contradictions to this instinct.

In the Antsihanaka region of Madagascar, the management of mortality and terminal suffering has birthed a specific, albeit clandestine, ritual known as *Famakiana voatavo*—or the "breaking of the pumpkin." This traditional funerary practice represents a profound sociological paradox: while modern medicine and global ethics strive to prolong life, this custom actively facilitates its cessation. The central inquiry of this study focuses on why this Sihanaka ritual seeks to shorten the lifespan of a progenitor. From a traditionalist viewpoint, the objective is not malicious; rather, it is a desperate measure intended to ensure the continuity of the lineage, protect the vitality of the youth and the unborn, and alleviate the perceived metaphysical suffering that a lingering elder might impose upon their progeny.

Madagascar possesses a rich tapestry of customs regarding death, many of which are shared across the island's diverse ethnic groups. However, the *Famakiana voatavo* remains a unique and often stigmatized method of confronting the end of life, largely hidden from the public eye and known only to those who decide upon and execute its protocols. This research aims to analyze this phenomenon through a dual lens, comparing traditional Malagasy conceptions of death with Christian doctrines of compassion and grace. By evaluating these conflicting worldviews, this work seeks to draw empirical conclusions that provide a pathway toward preventing the practice, ultimately replacing ritualized violence with a culture of life that upholds the dignity of every individual within the Sihanaka community.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND TOOLS

The methodological framework of this study is rooted in an ethnographic and socio-anthropological examination of Sihanaka customs. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the *Famakiana voatavo*, the research prioritized qualitative data acquisition through structured and semi-structured interviews with the *Tangalamena* (traditional custodians) and the *Zokiolona* (venerated elders), who serve as the primary repositories of communal history and ancestral law. This approach ensures that the analysis is grounded in the lived realities and oral traditions of the community, rather than relying solely on external observation.

2.1. Participant observation and field inquiry

Social research within indigenous contexts necessitates a profound immersion into the community's daily existence to interpret the nuanced reality of traditional practices. As **Van Maanen (2011)** suggests, such immersion allows the researcher to navigate the delicate balance between the "insider" and "outsider" perspective. While direct participation is invaluable, certain ritualistic responsibilities are strictly reserved for designated social figures and cannot be assumed by an external observer. Consequently, the researcher adopted a role of analytical observer, meticulously documenting the execution and social justification of these rites.

To supplement these observations, a systematic survey was conducted via questionnaires distributed to a representative segment of the population. This inquiry, following the methodological rigor established by **Quivy and Campenhoudt (2017)**, sought to address fundamental sociological questions: the identity of the actors involved, the motivations behind the perpetuation of these customs, and the perceived metaphysical or social consequences of deviating from established protocol. The empirical data was collected over a longitudinal period from 2007 to 2024 in the Andilanomby Fokontany, within the Ambatondrazaka district. This extensive field presence allowed for a diachronic analysis of social relations and group dynamics, aligning with the sociological frameworks defined by **Vallée (2024)**.

2.2. Application of the SWOT analytical framework

In evaluating the social and ethical implications of *Famakiana voatavo*, this study utilizes the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) matrix, originally developed by

Humphrey (1960). This tool facilitates a multifaceted analysis of the practice, acknowledging both its perceived internal utility and its external ethical conflicts.

- **Strengths** : Within the traditional Sihanaka worldview, the ritual is perceived as a potent mechanism for terminating a perceived cycle of "familial contagion" or recurring deaths. It serves as a pragmatic, albeit extreme, method to truncate the terminal suffering of the elderly when conventional means fail.
- **Weaknesses** : From a human rights and modern ethical perspective, the practice represents a profound violation of the right to life. It bypasses the natural or divinely ordained conclusion of life, replacing it with a human-sanctioned termination. Furthermore, the ritual often involves the use of psychoactive substances to provide the executors with the requisite "fortitude" to perform the act.
- **Opportunities** : The social crisis precipitated by such rituals provides a critical entry point for communal reconciliation and the introduction of Christian ethics. It offers an opportunity for the Church to demonstrate active compassion and support, thereby fostering social cohesion through an alternative framework of hope and eternal life.
- **Threats** : The primary threat remains the perpetuation of direct violence and the potential for intra-familial vendettas. Disagreements regarding the decision to perform the ritual can lead to long-term fragmentation of the kinship structure and legal repercussions.

2.3. Digital navigation and literary review

To contextualize local findings within the broader academic discourse, this study incorporates an extensive review of existing literature and digital resources. Engaging with the intellectual contributions of global analysts and sociologists is essential to avoid parochialism and to refine the researcher's own evidentiary conclusions. In an era of rapid technological advancement, leveraging digital archives allows for a comparative analysis that highlights the unique characteristics of Sihanaka culture while identifying universal patterns in human responses to death and suffering. As noted by **Creswell and Creswell (2018)**, the integration of diverse literary sources is fundamental to achieving the "triangulation" required for a valid and refined academic inquiry.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Ontological and sociological perspectives on mortality

Mortality remains a universal biological and existential constant, functioning as an incurable condition that inevitably dictates the cessation of life and the separation of the soul from the physical body. It represents an inescapable reality for all sentient beings, characterized by what **Dubeid (1991)** defines as the medical rupture of a psychophysical organism's unity and the subsequent dissolution of its structural integrity. Despite contemporary advancements in gerontology, physical optimization, and prophylactic medicine aimed at extending the human lifespan, empirical research confirms that the "spell of death" remains unbroken; science may delay the inevitable, but it has yet to eliminate it.

Beyond its biological inevitability, death is interpreted through diverse cultural lenses, with each ethnic group in Madagascar maintaining distinct epistemological frameworks for processing the end of life. As **Bloch (1982)** notes in his seminal work on Malagasy funerary practices, the social construction of death often serves to reinforce ancestral hierarchies and communal continuity. This study specifically examines the unique conceptualization of mortality within the Antsihanaka region, where village customs transform the biological event of passing into a complex social ritual. By analyzing these localized traditions, we gain insight into how the Sihanaka people navigate the tension between the loss of an individual and the preservation of the collective social fabric.

3.2. Communal Rites and Social Obligations

The announcement of a death within a Sihanaka village triggers an immediate and structured communal response, mandated by local authorities and kinship ties. Unlike casual social visits, these gatherings are purposeful; participants congregate at the deceased's residence to hear the circumstances surrounding the passing and to initiate necessary logistical arrangements. This collective involvement is a hallmark of what **Durkheim (1912)** described as "mechanical solidarity," where the cohesion of the group is maintained through shared rituals and responsibilities.

Specific tasks—ranging from the sanitation of the domestic space to the preparation of communal meals—are distributed among the family and neighbors to ensure the seamless transition of the deceased. A central element of these funerals is the slaughter of zebu cattle, a practice that serves as a public indicator of the family's socioeconomic status. While affluent families may sacrifice numerous cattle to demonstrate their prestige, the less fortunate adapt

by pooling resources or substituting expensive meats with affordable alternatives to fulfill their communal duties.

The disparity between the wealthy and the impoverished is further reflected in the duration and nature of the wake. The bodies of the affluent often remain above ground for extended periods to accommodate the arrival of distant relatives and to allow for protracted displays of mourning. Conversely, poorer households often expedite the burial process—rarely exceeding two nights—to mitigate the financial burden and avoid the social stigma associated with a prolonged, underfunded ceremony. This social stratification within mourning underscores how funerary rites serve not only as a farewell to the dead but also as a reinforcement of the existing social order among the living

3.3. Socio-ritual commentary: The phenomenon of *Famakiana Voatavo*

While the universal human inclination is to prolong life and delay the arrival of death, the Sihanaka practice of *Famakiana voatavo*—literally "breaking the pumpkin"—presents a culturally specific inversion of this impulse. Within this traditional framework, the ritual functions as a form of community-sanctioned euthanasia, though it is fundamentally distinguished by the fact that the impetus for death originates from the family rather than the terminally ill individual. This practice is typically reserved for elderly family members whose protracted state of suffering and inability to pass away are perceived as a metaphysical threat to the younger generations. As noted by **Thomas (1985)**, such "social deaths" often precede biological ones in traditional societies where the survival of the lineage takes precedence over individual longevity.

The sociological catalyst for this ritual is a phenomenon known locally as "pushing" (*pousser*). When a patriarch or matriarch remains in a state of terminal decline without expiring, the family may observe a tragic pattern: while the elder's health momentarily stabilizes, younger relatives—children or grandchildren—unexpectedly perish. From the Sihanaka perspective, this indicates that the elder is inadvertently "consuming" the vitality of the progeny to sustain their own lingering existence. When consecutive deaths occur, the kinship group may meet in absolute secrecy to decide upon a terminal intervention to safeguard the remaining family members.

The execution of *Famakiana voatavo* is a highly structured, clandestine event. The method involves strangulation using a long piece of fabric tightened by two individuals. Crucially, the task is often delegated to a son-in-law, reinforcing the social proverb that "a brother-in-law or a nephew are not direct blood parents," thereby creating a ritualistic distance between

the act and the immediate biological lineage. While some oral accounts suggest that external agents are occasionally hired and emboldened by psychoactive substances like cannabis , others insist the rite remains a strictly familial duty. Regardless of the executor, the community maintains a "conspiracy of silence"; the act is never categorized as murder, but rather as a necessary ritual fulfillment.

This practice is deeply intertwined with Malagasy belief systems regarding *ody* (charms or spells). It is believed that individuals possessing powerful "evil spells" or sorcery cannot achieve the finality of death unless they pass their "work" to a willing successor. If no descendant accepts the burden of these malefic powers, the individual remains trapped in a state of perpetual agony. The *Famakiana voatavo* thus serves as a violent severing of this metaphysical deadlock. However, as observed by **Lambek (1993)**, the introduction of global religions and modern legal frameworks often creates a tension between these ancestral obligations and contemporary ethics. Indeed, the influence of the Gospel and technological progress has led to a significant decline in the prevalence of this ritual in the Alaotra Mangoro region.

3.4. Comparative analysis and synthesis: Traditional and christian perspectives

The inevitability of death remains the ultimate equalizer within human existence, transcending religious and social stratifications. From a theological standpoint, mortality is often interpreted as the consequence of sin, a return to the primordial "dust" from which humanity was fashioned. This ontological reality necessitates a structured response from both the secular-traditional and the Christian communities in Madagascar. While the temporal manifestation of death varies for every individual, the collective necessity to process grief and manage the transition of the deceased creates a fertile ground for both cultural overlap and ideological tension. According to **Metcalf and Huntington (1991)**, the social management of death is never merely a private affair but a public performance of cultural values and communal solidarity.

3.4.1. Convergent funerary practices

Despite profound theological divergences, significant commonalities exist in the way Sihanaka traditionalists and Christians approach the immediate aftermath of a death. Both groups recognize the necessity of ritualized mourning to maintain social equilibrium. The following shared elements characterize the Malagasy funerary landscape:

- **Communal accompaniment** : Both the *Fokonolona* (village community) and the Christian congregation prioritize presence, ensuring that the bereaved family is never left in isolation during the mourning period.
- **Tangible sympathy through financial contribution** : The practice of providing monetary support—often referred to as *vola fao-dranomaso* (tear-wiping money)—serves as a visible and essential sign of mutual aid and social bonding.
- **Delayed inhumation** : The burial process is systematically postponed for a specific duration, dictated by family protocols, to allow for the gathering of kin and the fulfillment of ancestral or ecclesiastical requirements.
- **Rituals of purification** : Following the interment, both traditions engage in specific acts of purification or "cleansing" to transition the living back into the mundane world and separate them from the pollution of death.

As **Graeber (1995)** elucidates in his study of Malagasy social values, these shared practices highlight a fundamental cultural "bedrock" where the duty toward the dead acts as the primary engine for social cohesion, regardless of the specific religious affiliation of the mourners. By identifying these convergences, we can better understand how the Sihanaka people navigate their dual identity as both heirs to ancestral traditions and members of a global faith.

3.4.2. Structural and ideological divergences

While the communal response to death demonstrates a degree of social synchronization, a rigorous sociological analysis reveals profound bifurcations between traditional Sihanaka customs and Christian orthopraxy. These differences are not merely ritualistic but are rooted in distinct cosmological orientations regarding time, authority, and the nature of the sacred. As noted by **Thomas (1985)**, the tension between ancestral obligations and Christian theology often necessitates a complex negotiation of identity within Malagasy communities. The following table delineates these points of divergence, illustrating how belief systems dictate the practical management of bereavement.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of socio-religious paradigms : Traditional Sihanaka customs versus christian ecclesiastical orthopraxy in the management of mortality.

Traditional Sihanaka Praxis	Sociological Dimension	Christian Ecclesiastical Praxis
Uninterrupted presence	Communal	Collective presence is maintained,

(<i>Fifanotronana</i>) regardless of the day or secular/religious holidays.	Convergence	yet prioritized liturgical duties (Sunday worship) take precedence over the wake.
Immediate intervention of the <i>Tangalamena</i> , <i>Mpanandro</i> , and <i>Dadarabe</i> for ritual guidance.	Authority and Governance	Clergy and church elders intervene only upon formal invitation to provide pastoral care and lead liturgical services.
Mandatory contribution known as " <i>vola ratsy</i> " to avoid the stigma of leaving the deceased "on the ground."	Financial Sympathy	Contributions (<i>vola fao-dranomaso</i>) are viewed as a visible manifestation of mutual support and empathetic solidarity.
Strict adherence to <i>fady</i> (taboos); burials are categorically prohibited on Tuesdays and Thursdays.	Temporal Regulation	Funerals are scheduled based on logistical convenience and the availability of the congregation, free from weekday taboos.
Extensive purification rituals performed immediately following the interment.	Purification Rites	Post-funeral activities focus on spiritual consolation, typically occurring the day after the burial.
Recourse to <i>Famakiana voatavo</i> in cases of protracted terminal suffering or perceived spiritual contagion.	Interventional Ritual	Explicit rejection of the practice ; conversion to Christianity mandates the cessation of life-terminating rituals.

This comparative matrix illustrates the transition from a "closed" traditional system governed by ancestral taboos (*fady*) and cyclical time to an "open" Christian framework defined by pastoral order. While both systems prioritize social cohesion, the Christian approach replaces metaphysical dread and rigid temporal restrictions with voluntary solidarity and institutionalized spiritual support (Graeber, 1995).

3.4.3. Social equilibrium and the dilemma of cultural dualism

A critical sociological observation reveals a paradox in the manifestation of communal solidarity: "pagan" or non-religious traditionalists often display a more robust and transparent social cohesion than their Christian counterparts. While traditionalists exhibit an unwavering reverence for ancestral authority, defending their customs with unapologetic conviction, many Christians navigate a state of cultural dualism. This phenomenon often leads to a "mimetic behavior" where believers perform religious piety in the presence of ecclesiastical authorities but clandestinely revert to ancestral practices—such as the consumption of ritual alcohol—once those authorities depart (Bourdieu, 1977). Such behavior suggests that the fear of social ostracization and the weight of tradition often exert a more immediate pressure than theological conviction.

3.4.4. The Erosion of agape and the performance of piety

Furthermore, a perceived erosion of *agape* (selfless love) within certain Christian circles manifests as a preoccupation with ecclesiastical schedules over the immediate, visceral needs of the grieving. The tendency to prioritize formal church attendance or to engage in superficial social commentary during wakes reveals a lack of genuine consolatory depth. As **Maury (1959)** profoundly articulates, the presence of Christ should act as the ultimate negation of death's finality. However, when believers appear "ashamed" of the Gospel's radical demands or fear that faith might necessitate a total abandonment of comfortable social syncretism, they fail to provide the transformative "salt and light" required by a society submerged in metaphysical dread.

3.4.5. Eschatological hope as a catalyst for change

Authentic Christian witness is not found in social withdrawal but in a proactive, transformative engagement with the community. This involvement is grounded in the assurance that the resurrection of Christ is the power granted to the faithful to overcome the cycle of despair (**Zumstein et al., 1984**). By moving beyond a "duty-bound" presence toward a "ministry of sharing," the Church can offer a quality of relationship that saves the individual in their totality (**Gay-Lemaire, 2014**). Ultimately, as argued by **Royon and Philibert (1995)**, the Church fulfills its mission by addressing social pathologies through direct action—educating citizens to protect life and fostering a social development that replaces the fear of death with the promise of eternal life.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND SOCIOLOGICAL PROPOSITIONS

The intersection of individual suffering and communal duty necessitates a multifaceted approach that integrates pastoral care with sociological intervention. The following propositions are intended to foster a social environment that upholds human dignity while addressing the complexities of Sihanaka traditional beliefs.

4.1. The gospel as a catalyst for social consolation

Mortality and suffering are inextricable realities of the human condition, requiring a response that transcends mere material assistance. In moments of profound distress, the proclamation of the Gospel serves as a vital instrument of hope, providing what the Psalmist describes as a "present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). Sociologically, the bereaved—though often overwhelmed by grief—possess a heightened sensitivity to the presence and actions of their community. Therefore, the Christian witness must be characterized by a "ministry of

presence" that offers not only financial support but also the assurance of eternal life through the resurrection of Christ. As argued by **Boinnard et al. (1984)**, the power of the Gospel lies in its ability to offer life in the face of death, positioning the believer as "salt and light" within a society navigating metaphysical shadows.

4.2. Eradication of ritual violence and the sanctity of life

It is a categorical moral imperative for religious and social leaders to advocate for the cessation of the *Famakiana voatavo* (the pumpkin ritual). While certain segments of society may perceive this practice as a solution to generational maledictions or terminal agony, it remains a violation of the intrinsic value of the human soul. The duty of the Church is to intervene by convincing families of the sacred nature of life, regardless of its perceived quality or the presence of sorcery. Following the framework established by **Royon and Philibert (1995)**, the Church must act as a social conscience, addressing the root causes of ritual violence and educating citizens to protect life rather than terminate it. This intervention is not an act of cultural aggression but an affirmation of the creative sovereignty of God over all human life.

4.3. Pastoral responsibility and transformative grace

The role of spiritual leaders is fundamental in shifting the communal gaze from cruel traditions toward restorative care. This transition requires the dissemination of four unconditional truths: the rejection of conditional love, the patience of divine affection, the recognition of love as a gift, and the total acceptance of the suffering individual. According to **Powlison (2018)**, the concept of "unconditional grace" is essential to overcome the despair and fear that drive families toward desperate measures. To achieve this, the pastor must prioritize moral support through empathetic listening and head-to-head accompaniment, as suggested by **Van Geest (1981)**. By fostering a deep relational bond, the Church can provide a safer alternative to ritualized death, ensuring the holistic well-being of the person.

4.4. Holistic development and the role of the church

Ultimately, the Church serves as an instrument for social evolution and the eradication of the ignorance that fuels harmful practices. Faith in Jesus Christ must be manifested through daily labor and ethical conduct, contributing to the broader development of Sihanaka society (**Semire, 2010**). As **Piper (2015)** notes, Christ is the fundamental solution for the flourishing of the human person in their totality. Consequently, the Church has a duty to engage with social issues, advocating for justice and poverty alleviation as part of its core mission

(Ekakhol, 2022). By integrating spiritual guidance with social action, religious institutions can catalyze a permanent shift in societal values, replacing ancient fears with a collective commitment to human rights and communal progress.

5. CONCLUSION

The socio-anthropological investigation into the *Famakiana voatavo* within the Sihanaka community reveals a complex intersection between ancestral survival mechanisms and evolving ethical paradigms. This study has demonstrated that while the "pumpkin ritual" is perceived by traditionalists as a functional necessity to safeguard the lineage's vitality against metaphysical contagion, it stands in direct opposition to contemporary human rights and modern ontological views on the sanctity of life. The persistence of such practices underscores a profound cultural dualism, where ancestral taboos continue to exert a powerful influence over social behavior, often operating beneath the surface of formal religious affiliation.

The comparative analysis between traditional Sihanaka customs and ecclesiastical orthopraxy highlights that while both systems prioritize communal solidarity, they diverge significantly in their management of mortality and suffering. The transition from a fear-based ritualistic intervention to a grace-centered pastoral accompaniment is essential for the holistic development of the region. Religious and social institutions must transcend their roles as mere observers to become proactive agents of change, addressing the root causes of ritual violence through education and unconditional support.

Ultimately, the eradication of life-terminating rituals in the Alaotra Mangoro region depends on a synthesis of spiritual renewal and social justice. By embracing a perspective of hope, the community can replace desperate measures with a culture of life that values the human person in their totality. This research suggests that the responsibility of leaders is not to withdraw from society, but to act as a transformative force—an instrument of compassion that empowers citizens to discern and resist practices contrary to human dignity. Through this commitment, the Sihanaka society can navigate its rich cultural heritage while fostering a future defined by justice, empathy, and the absolute preservation of every individual.

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