

Cultural Practice in Côte d'Ivoire: An Ethnography of the Feminization of Funeral Expenses

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The “*Letagonins*”: a concept socially constructed to designate the “*beating*” women of Ivorian society, evokes those who have as their leitmotif, a self-realization through work. The purpose lies in their ability to free themselves from male domination. This concept means in one of the local Ivorian languages, notably the Gouro¹: *female boy*. These women of Gouro ethnicity show a deep passion for the marketing of food products in Abidjan. However, behind this passion for food is their commitment to funeral expenses; a cultural activity customary lying with agnatic parentage. The transgression of custom by the latter under the prism of their social repositioning is the symbolic manifestation of the destandardization of the traditional relationship between man and woman in the organization of funerals in Gouro country, in the central West Ivorian. Understanding this relational reconfiguration has fuelled our passion as a researcher. In fact, ethnography has been mobilized as a method of observing the funeral practices of these women. In this regard, the study traces the strategies for negotiating access to the land as well as those used to negotiate access to information.

Keywords: funeral expenses, destandardization, ethnography, negotiating strategies, Côte d'Ivoire

Introduction

Socially referred to as “Woman Boy” through the concept of “*Letagonin*”, Gouro women are increasingly part of a process of relational mobility, as they show a real desire to free themselves from male domination. Determined to succeed in the path of postage, they have developed a great passion in the marketing of food products in almost all municipalities of the district of Abidjan. They transport them from the most remote village areas, sometimes the most landlocked through their membership in well-structured associations. Through this passion, they have succeeded in making the Ivory Coast a food-self-sufficient country in West Africa. This passion has even led some to replace local authorities by creating markets from private funds that they call “*gouro market*”. The monopoly and female leadership created around their management commands society’s respect, esteem, and admiration for them.

However, behind this passion for food is a commitment of these women to funeral expenses; a cultural activity customary lying with agnatic parentage. This commitment sometimes pushes them to break local norms in order to create a space of visibility in funeral spending practices. The transgression of custom by these

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¹ Ivorian local language belonging to the large Mande du Sud group, based in the central west of the Ivory Coast.

women through the prism of their social repositioning is the symbolic manifestation of the destandardization of traditional relations between men and women in the organization of funerals in Gouro country, in the Central West Ivorian (Preiswerk, 2010; Fontier, 2017).

Several authors have focused on funeral expenses in Africa in general and in Côte d'Ivoire in particular. In their approach, they give priority to family, ethnic, clan, and lignagère relations as a structural system for the organization of funeral rites (Dembélé, 1977; Seri, 1989; Yapo, 1990; Gozé, 1992, Semiti, 1992, Béké, 1992; Kipré, 1992; Tingbé-Azalou, 1992; Bouimon, 1992). These authors demonstrate through their study that the results reflect a vocation of domination and subordination of women during the organization of funerals. In this regard, their contributions mention that financial expenditure is the return of men, while expenditure by women, generally, is only symbolic expenditure and positions it in the background.

From this perspective, it is noted that these writings remain focused on women's dependence on men in funeral expenses. They deal in abundance with the priority given to men in decisions regarding expenses (taking care of the body in the morgue, buying the coffin and other expenses related to burial, etc.). From this point of view, women's investment in this relational expenditure structure is still limited and suggests that women are only required to focus on the implementation of funeral rites such as widowhood, preparation of body, crying, after men decided, although sometimes the organization of funeral rites was seized as a means of recalling their primordial importance to men.

However, the observation made on our field of study notably in Abidjan in the Gouro d'Adjamé market and in the western centre of the Ivory Coast in the department of Zuénoula and six of its outlying villages including Gohitafla (capital of sub-prefecture), Maminigui (deputy prefect, home to a cantonal chief), Iriéfla (sub-prefecture capital housing a cantonal chief), Flaya, Manfla, Jéliäfla, shows a tendency of Gouro food traders to participate more and more in funeral expenses through resources generated in associations to be used to maintain and develop their economic activity. This role being traditionally assigned to men in Gouro country tends to be more and more appropriate by these women from this geographical area of Côte d'Ivoire. This reconfiguration of sex relationships in funeral expenses is less explicit or unexplored in almost the entire journal in our possession.

Methodology

With a view to breaking the explanation of funeral expenses accentuated on the contribution of men on the one hand, and on the other hand, to making sense of the funeral spending practices orchestrated by women in the cultural system of Gouro ethnicity, the qualitative approach of inductive obedience quickly became indispensable and best suited in the context of this work. It is therefore a question of understanding the statutory dynamics and the gender relationship in the organization of funerals in Gouro country.

As part of this study, we mobilized the ethnographic approach. Indeed, according to Boas (1896/2017, p. 545), cited by St-Denis (2018, p. 81), the ethnographic method qualifies as an inductive approach. By adhering to this approach, the anthropologist chooses not to "force phenomena into a theoretical straitjacket". In this sense, ethnography is an approach characterized by scientific production of data from empirical reality through participating observation. In addition, this approach aims to understand "the intentionality and meanings of actions" (Schwartz, 1993, cited by Louvel, 2008) and to bring out new data through the description of the facts.

The authors indicate that the researcher's adoption of the ethnographic approach is not a random effect but rather the empirical nature of the phenomenon studied that situates it. In fact, as Céfaï (2008) points out, the

researcher's choice of ethnographic is legitimized by a routineization of the facts. As a result, he wants to see and hear outside of these routines and habits that have accumulated during his journey of experiences.

Weber (2009), quoted by Morissette et al. (2014), agrees. He will talk about rethinking the categories that have traditionally dominated to better understand and explain phenomena. In this respect, the researcher is part of the inductive ethnographic approach to contribute to the re-renewing of a study that remained on the margins of scientific production.

According to our study, the use of ethnography is interesting. In this respect, the need for a renewal of the explanation of the said phenomenon focused on the feminization of funeral expenses arises acutely. That said, our integration into the social spaces of Gouro women has been not without difficulties. We had to negotiate our access to these different social fields.

In view of the fact that each social group "builds its own distinct cultural realities; to understand them, we must cross their borders and observe them from within, which is more or less difficult given our own cultural distance from a studied group" (P.Woods, 1986, quoted by Nouveau Millenaire, *Defis Et Libertaires*, 2006, p.2). Thus, in order to cross the border of Gouro women in situations of funeral expenses and thus implement the technique of immersion, we first had to negotiate our access and information. These are two necessary practices for the ethnographer to be overridden by the barriers of the respondents and to gain full access to the investigative relationship through its integration. This is what the document of Nouveau Millenaire, *Defis Et Libertaires* (2006, p.8) supports by stating that: "Whatever method you choose to investigate, you have to negotiate the right to access it as a researcher. This negotiation can take place on several levels... In addition, once we enter the place, the relationship to people will have to be constantly negotiated and renegotiated throughout the research (and not just at the beginning)." How did the negotiation of access to the land and access to information consist in the context of that study? The objective of this paper therefore traces the social conditions of our inclusion in the investigation relationship. The rest of the work is focused on clearing the main joints. It does so, by describing in the first part the strategies implemented to negotiate access to the land, and in the second part, the strategies deployed to negotiate access to information.

Results

From Negotiation to Access to the Field: Between Mobilizing Sponsors and Integrating Into Sociability Frameworks

The first phase of the negotiation was to negotiate access to both the Gouro market and the aforementioned villages in order to understand women's funeral spending practices. On the basis of this observation, our integration into the market and into the village spaces was not done in an ex nihilo way, we had to negotiate access to these spaces. We have deployed certain strategies in order to access them: the technique of sponsorship based on the solicitation of the COMAGOUA-ROXY cooperative and social capital, and then the insertion into the frameworks of women and villager's sociability.

The Sponsorship Strategy Based on the Solicitation of the COMAGOUA Cooperative and Social Capital. The participating observation took place first at the Gouro market in Adjamé. It is a social space invested by women for their various commercial activities. This commercial space, at first glance presents itself as open, since several economic operators or purchasers of provisions go there to meet their needs and, therefore, it interacts several ethnic groups including allogenes and immigrant. However, in social interaction based on the management mechanisms of this market and funeral organization practices, the market presents

itself as socially closed. Indeed, it presents itself as socially and symbolically constructed by Gouro ethnicity. As a result, the modes of accessibility, control, and territorial management are administered by internal management structures: the Gouro women themselves and their associations. These women jealously guard the mechanisms of foundation and control of this commercial establishment that makes their pride and social recognition as women flying. The presence of a researcher in their midst can be translated, beyond commercial activities, into a form of reluctance on the part of these women. As a result, we have tried to avoid this pitfall by mobilizing the sponsorship technique.

According to Clerét (2013):

A “foreigner” to the group or phenomenon studied can be translated into a form of reluctance on the part of individuals to see an outsider arrive. To legitimize this entry, some research, like that of Whyte (1955) on the social structure of an Italian-American district, uses a privileged interlocutor who plays the role of “godfather”. (p. 58)

The Gouro market was not unknown to us because we were doing our market there. We have filed a letter of recommendation with COMAGOUA-ROXY management for authorization to conduct the space investigation. Remember that it is a management structure of the Gouro market set up by the late Nanti lou Rosalie, the pioneer of this market. In order to ensure that this study was conducted in an academic setting, the director of that structure wanted to get in touch with our thesis director. Once the confirmation was made, he issued us with an authorization document allowing us to meet the Gouro women on their sales space.

With the barrier of administrative mistrust being lifted, we relied on its sponsorship to gain access to the world of Gouro women’s sales. This has been translated, at first glance, into the fact that he proposes to lead us to these women. Through a presentation speech, he constructs us as his “protected”. He asks the women to take care of us and give us the information necessary to write the thesis. Moreover, despite the Director’s presentation, some women were still suspicious of us. To make up for this, we have once again mobilized the sponsorship of another collaborator of the director. This one is the accountant of the structure.

Our collaboration within the structure has given us some information about this accountant. It came back to us that he is the nephew of the late Nanti lou, the founder of the market. It is built as the “*favourite*” of women in that it maintains a relationship of affectivity and affinity with its last ones. He listens to them and sometimes does not hesitate to help them. We therefore relied on the symbolic capital he enjoys from these women to invest him in the investigative relationship as a sponsor. Our final entry with these women was legitimized by the sponsorship of the accountant.

As far as negotiation at the village space is concerned, we have also mobilised the sponsorship technique. This technique allowed us to observe the progress of funeral practices and the way in which Gouro operates. Indeed, the negotiation of access to the village taken as an ethnographic field of investigation was done thanks to the sponsorship of a friend in the year of sociology thesis. He had just lost his mother and the funeral was scheduled to take place in July. We offered to go and support him in the village. We went on July 5, 2019 in convoy to the home village of the deceased, a village called Flaya. It is a village that brings together three large villages in-house. My friend went there a day before us. This one on arrival, although in a situation of mourning announced our arrival for a study in the village. This has been favorable through the welcome and manifestation of their availability to our place. We spent three weeks there for the first phase of immersion, so from this village we traveled to other villages under the auspice spree of sponsorship.

On the other hand, we have developed another strategy on the ground. It was necessary for us to cross the border imposed on us by the distrust of certain women, especially the leaders of women's groupings in the market and also the rural women de facto of their illiteracy.

Inclusion in Sociability Frameworks as a Strategy for Integration Into the Investigative Relationship.

While the sponsorship strategy has allowed us to access some women in the market, in some circumstances women have remained closed to questions. It is true that it allowed us to be accepted in the market space and conduct our investigation into funeral expenses. However, some of the issues that were important to us were sensitive issues for these women. They felt that these questions affected their privacy. Indeed, if we were working on women's funeral expenses, it was equally interesting for the study to know the overall expenditure structure for these women in order to identify the expense pockets, the priorities in the expenses of areas of social life that were much more invested in spending. There were also issues related to the gender relationship within families in the structuring of consumer spending.

When certain aspects of her questions were discussed with them, some, in this case the association presidents, felt that they were touching on their sensibilities and that they were unable to answer them. In addition, we were faced with a deadlock. Association leaders have passed on information to women that we are asking questions that are considered "*incorfortables*" and therefore, in such cases, they should refrain from answering them. As women were well structured within the associations, this information was relayed on a loop in the market. This has also stoked mistrust of us. However, we needed to have this data in order to better structure the paradox of our problem. With this in mind, we decided to activate women's sociability frameworks in the market in order to break down barriers permanently.

To this end, we noticed, as a result of direct observations of this commercial space, that some commercial ponds were held, makeshift warehouses served as places of hair and braid of women. The peculiarity of these places is that they attract a lot of women. Beyond being a place where the activity of female braiding is practiced, these spaces are frames of sociability. Their social function is the exchange of symbolic aspects related to the exercise of their food marketing activity. In this respect, they get to know each other better and to socialize, to talk about their difficulties in the market, they exchange advice by motivating each other for the smooth running of their activity.

Another social function that characterizes these spaces is that they constitute spaces for the extension of domestic spaces. These women come to talk about their married life, the family relationship, and the structuring of consumer spending between her and their husbands. These two social characteristics of these places, led us to frequent them. From now on we came there to weave ourselves and also to make our twin daughters' braid. We have thus become loyal customers of this place. This has allowed us to develop social interactions with Gouro women who also frequent these spaces. This allowed us to create some affinities with these women and thus break the boundary built on the sensitivity of the subjects mentioned.

Also, in terms of our integration into the village spaces, we also had to insert ourselves into certain frameworks of village sociability. These are small commercial spaces selling palm wine called "*Bangui*" and craft drinks called "*Koutoukou*". These spaces are most often managed by women and are places where men are gathered. They come to consume these local drinks by exchanging on the facts of village society in this case, family activities, rural activities, and especially the adventures that surround the organization of the funeral.

To this end, we noticed that the period from Monday to Thursday is devoted to country activities on Friday which is the day of funeral in the village, Saturday dedicated to funerals and Sunday are days of rest.

During these last three days, these frames of sociability do not deplete because they allow men to exchange on the funeral news of the village. Indeed, these spaces are often a setting where men demonstrate through tense discussions their ability to take care of funeral expenses and also the place to lay bare through criticism those who have not been able to honor their duty of taking in charge these expenses. These criticisms are more acerbic especially when it was a woman (a sister, a cousin, a niece) who was able to assume it.

Thus, we discerned that apart from the sponsorship we sought for our access to the land, these places could allow us to make ourselves known more and thus access the information we were looking for. With this in mind we did not pray for access. In the village of Flaya, we expressed the need to consume local palm wine, while we sat and placed our order, we noticed the presence of a man whose concerns related precisely to the recurrence of the jousting funerals in the village. He could be heard complaining that the village was rather inclined and quick to focus on organizing funeral ceremonies every day. In doing so, according to the latter, village communities are trapping crucial problems, including cases of disease.

On this basis we noticed that it was a timely opportunity for us to discuss the matter with him. So we approached the latter, trying to greet him in the local language, that is, in Gouro. Let us remember that, we set out to learn the basics for the needs of immersion. When we sat next to him, we asked him for permission to drink from his glass in order to build the relationship of trust. He accepted without hesitation. As other men came to sit on our table. In fact, we set out to pay a litre and a half of drink, especially the “*Koutoukou*” for newcomers.

It should be added that from these sociability frameworks, the information relates from mouth to ear from one frame to another. Outside the first beverage sales space, we have integrated the next day another sales space. This area is more frequented by the young people of the village. Once in this new environment, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the young people who were there had had the information that I had bought the drink for the “old”. So they demanded that I buy some for them as well. So I did what they asked. Thereafter, an atmosphere of conviviality, exchange, and sharing between us and the latter was created.

These three attitudes (hello in the Gouro language, drinking from the same glass and buying *koutoukou*) have earned us to be accepted into the various social frameworks and thus negotiate our access to the village space definitively. The status of researcher that we endorsed during the first hours of our accessibility in the field, quickly melted into the game of social interactions operated within these social frameworks. If the mobilization of sponsorship and the insertion into the frameworks of sociability, allowed us to negotiate our access to the field of the respondents, we must note that access to information was not also given in advance. As the document *Nouveau Millenaire, Defis Et Libertaires* (2006) points out in an ethnographic study in a school: “But it is sometimes difficult, even with a good introduction, to get full collaboration from all teachers. They may be concerned that the researcher’s intrusion will disrupt their class; they may feel they are being evaluated. These apprehensions can lead to active opposition to research.” (Nouveau Millenaire, Defis Et Libertaires, 2006, p.9). To the extent that we could be confronted with the biases of desirability (Tchanbi & Droh, 2017, p. 8), access to information also had to be negotiated.

The Practice of Decentralization as a Strategy for Negotiating Access to Information

One of the epistemological biases relating to the practice of ethnography is for the researcher to think that the negotiation of access to space, to the social group under investigation gives immediate access to information. When it is accepted on the observation site, it still has to negotiate its access to information.

Negotiating access to information requires the researcher to discover the real latent meaning behind the information given by the respondents. Because apparent information can be desirable. It is in this context that Bensa (1995, p. 8) draws the researcher's attention by stating that: "Anthropology is indeed aimed at a reality that is not that of the facts, but that of a probable meaning never entirely reducible to pre-established patterns." The epistemological principles in proportion to decentralization are structured in two points: the overcoming of pre-notions and the inclusion in the activities of the respondents.

"... The ethnographer who is aware of the subjective effects of his involvement in the field must practice decentralization. The first is the position of the researcher on his object, which is never neutral and is often charged with 'pre-notions' (...) then, he must pay his attention so as not to compromise his relationship with the actors. It's about investigating by doing the same activities as the populations we study." (Durkheim, 1991, quoted by Marsac, 2015, p. 4)

The Deconstruction of "Value Judgments" on Gouro Women as a Gateway to Information. As part of the study of women's participation in funeral expenses, we practiced decentralization. Our negotiation of access to information has not been without its pitfalls. The pitfalls were created by the manifestation of our own relationship to the respondents. Indeed, the social category on which our study is based is the Gouro women in the food sector. In relation to this type of activity around which they have built a real monopoly and leadership and, in turn, have helped to make the Ivory Coast a self-sufficient country in food products; they are considered by Ivorian society to be "*beating*" women who compete with men. To the point, according to social imaginations, in Gouro country, men are much more dependent on women. Because of the leadership of these women in households, their men are perceived as "*lazy*". They are now called "letagonin". This perception tends to deconstruct the social power of their husbands in maintaining the balance of the household.

In fact, society builds these women as actresses who are in conflict with certain social values including submission, respect for the husband. This is symbolically reflected in the social status of the latter. An observation on the Gouro market shows that these women are mostly divorced, widowed, or single. In addition, another popular imagination has developed around them. He tends to build them like "*palabreu*" women. This is because when the customer asks for the price of the goods without paying, they can get angry and make insults and threats against them. This double perception of the status of the Gouro woman in society has formed the framework of our ideological apparatus towards them.

To this end, we were charged with pre-notions and value judgments around these conceptions conveyed by society before addressing them as subject to study. This helped to create a barrier between them and us at the beginning of the investigation because as a researcher we were part of an attitude of distrust towards them. We were not free in the way we asked certain questions. Sometimes we voluntarily put certain issues in the trap for fear that they will stoke their anger and put us in a situation of hostility and refolement. The "*hermetic*" nature of these women and the status of "*female boy*" conferred on them by society, have constantly led us to be accompanied by a person known to those around them to do interviews. Unfortunately, in the presence of these people, they gave apparent answers but did not go into detail.

Faced with all its constraints, we have adopted the decentralization. It consisted of deconstructing our aprioris towards these women in order to enter into the investigative relationship. This was done through a click. Indeed, during an interview with three of these women, we realized that behind the iron shell that society has built for them and that they proudly wear, hide sensitive women, vulnerable as well as others. They experience the same difficulties of married life as all women from all socio-professional strata. Some have not hesitated to

share with us their difficulties, their precariousness, and their vulnerability. They explained to us with open heart their experiences of gender relations in the household and especially related to funeral expenses. We propose, if necessary, to share with them ours and propose solutions based on our experience of married life. Through the exchange of experiences, we felt a reciprocal relationship of trust. They were therefore receptive and open to all our advice. As a result, we have judged this societal way of perceiving them and simply seeing them as a neutral subject capable of providing us with the data we were looking for. This allowed us to free ourselves, to ask questions of their sensibility without fear of reprisal. With this attitude, we were able to negotiate access to information.

Inclusion in Socio-Cultural Activities as a Negotiating Strategy for Access to Information. Negotiation for access to information requires the inclusion in the practices of actors in observation to create familiarity (Bensa, 1995, p. 8). The latter therefore proposes the strategy of “intelligence of circumstances” to access the hidden meaning of information. This is reflected in this statement: “While the initial situation is characterized by total opacity, the ethnologist reports on the forms of intelligibility that allows the gradual acquisition of a practical familiarity with the uses of society. It is through “the intelligence of circumstances” that the researcher can access the meaning of social play.”

We have identified this advice and applied it in the village spaces. One of the symbolic contributions of women to funeral expenses is the preparation of the dishes in order to receive the guests of the bereaved. If necessary, we urged women to participate in the preparatory sessions. Also, the data collection consisted of interacting with these actresses in the context of organizing the funeral precisely during funeral vigils on spaces dedicated to the funeral. This interaction occurred in both Abidjan and the village. We sketched steps of the dance “*Zaouli*” (cultural dance and identity of the Gouro) with women. We practiced it with all kinds of difficulty, which was a moment of laughter and mockery. At times we had to participate in some ostentatious practices socially known as “*work*”: it is the distribution of money on the dancer of the *Zaouli* when he sketches frenzied steps. This allowed them to be questioned in a practical situation and then to note any gestures and symbolic facts in our field diary. This familiarity created also allowed us to integrate into a group of women from different associations from Abidjan. Our involvement or practice of the same activities as these women, has earned us to be vigilant in order to avoid any relationship compromise with actors and actresses.

Discussion

The illustrative result of this study is the importance of practicing decentralization for the ethnographer in order to discover the hidden meaning behind the apparent information. It is a strategy that is based on overcoming value judgments, stereotypes, and misconceptions about the subject matter of study on the one hand and the inclusion of the ethnographer in the social activities practiced by the group. We have implemented this strategy, especially with the Gouro women. This has allowed us both to establish a relationship of trust and to highlight the meaning that their mobilization for funeral expenses in the Gouro country hides. Goffman (1966, quoted Bonta, 2008, p. 8) also practiced this strategy as part of his study on totalitarian institutions, including asylums. It offers a reading of the shift centered on the upheaval of its own structure of belief relative to the madman. Indeed, he considers “the madmen” as sensible and normal. Therefore, according to the author, “the madmen” are not crazy because of the disease, but because of the social context of the “totalitarian institution” that poses a social distance from the outside world. Thus, he manages to detect the meaning of interaction between doctors and residents of this institution.

The results also corroborate those of Natalie Rigaux (1998, quoted by Bonta, 2008, p. 9) and Tchan-Bi and Droh (2017, pp. 10-11). The first studied senile dementia by immersing herself by participating observation, in a closed institution in Lyon. It invites us to disengage from the risks of closure of access to information, and to open ourselves to the experience of otherness, without which exchange, and the question of meaning are not possible. The latter practiced the decentralization to the effect of capturing the meaning of bargaining practices between municipal officials and users of urban green spaces in Abidjan. They had to deconstruct their preconcepts of the “*deviarifying*” practices they made of municipal officers in order to understand that these practices were in fact legitimized by their guardianship institution. The discovery of this meaning was possible by participating in the field with its municipal agents in the operations of control and deviating from the “informal” uses of urban green spaces by traders.

Conclusion

Our passion around mobilizing Gouro women for funeral expenses has led us to adopt ethnography. Based on the participant observation, we attempted to capture the meaning of the destandardization of traditional relationships between men and women in the practice of this cultural activity. This passion was the catalyst for the adoption of certain strategies to enter the investigative relationship. We learned the basics of the Gouro language, the mobilization of sponsors, the insertion into sociability frameworks, the deconstruction of our preconceptions relating to the status of the Gouro woman, and our insertion into their socio-cultural activities. This passion developed, allowed us to learn some lessons from our relationship to the field. Whatever the terrain, the ethnographer must adopt two epistemological attitudes necessary to capture the meaning hidden behind the apparent information. First, the researcher must negotiate access to the field. Second, he must negotiate access to information. Because negotiating to the land does not mean having access to information. An extension of this article exposes the meaning of relational mobility exercised by these women through the spaces of visibility that they build in their involvement in funeral expenses.

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