

Money, intimacy and morality: Experiences and narratives of women in Nosy Komba, Madagascar

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Abstract:

This article discusses the morality of transactional relationships in Nosy Komba, an island located off the Northwest coast of Madagascar. By stepping back from neoliberal ideologies on agency, I explore the ways in which women negotiate, experience, and interpret social relationships through economic exchanges. I hereby argue that the tension and interdependency of money and social relationships – including kin, Malagasy men and foreigners – are embedded in different moralities through which long-standing social norms and personal expectations are continuously negotiated, allowing for different conceptions of agency to arise.

Keywords: Social relationships; agency; morality of exchanges; money; intimacy

Classical anthropological research on Madagascar has long explored how power is exercised within social structures. Special emphasis has been placed on the role of kin-based networks – organised around the power of ancestors – and their associated gendered norms in shaping

how people interact with their social environment (see Baré 1980; Ottino 1964). In the early literature, the place of women was mainly investigated through the lens of kinship and marriage, and how their subsequent roles were essential to the formation and perpetuation of “the social and cosmic order” (Parry and Bloch 1989). The prevalence of patrilineal systems in northwest Madagascar, for instance, had long disadvantaged women in terms of inheritance and access to land (Baré 1980; Ottino 1964). Similarly, more recent studies, for example Sen and Grown (1987), have highlighted the negative impact of colonial reforms and policies of economic liberalisation on women’s economic situation in various places across the world. For example, the increasing number of women engaging in the sexual economy in the Global South is often perceived as a striking example of women’s disempowerment, resulting from the collapse of “traditional” kinship systems, as well as the circulation of economic capital and the influx of Western people, practices, and ideas.

All too often, non-Western societies are scrutinised in light of global forces (e.g. colonialism, capitalism, neoliberal policies), with a particular interest in how these historical processes have transformed “traditional” ways of living. As social structures experienced new power dynamics, they would progressively abandon older forms of kinship and marriage, and adopt liberal systems of social and economic exchange, supposedly more individualistic. A narrow focus on Western global forces undermines other factors of change whilst also failing to consider that non-Western societies were never isolated into separate systems before colonial times, but have “constituted themselves in direct relation to others across the globe” (Prestholdt 2004, 780). Madagascar was a place of global interactions, long before it officially became a French colony in 1896. In Madagascar, stratified histories, notably shaped by centuries of trade exchanges, the rise of expansionist kingdoms (16th - 19th century), colonialism (1896-1960), and recent neoliberal policies (since the 1990s) have channelled how power is produced, negotiated, and resisted over time. Nosy

Komba, a small volcanic island located off the northwest coast of Madagascar, is a great example of how a seemingly isolated place is, in reality, part of a larger interconnected system. Despite its small physical size and its relative geographical isolation, Nosy Komba has long been a place of global interactions. Since the 1990s, tourist infrastructures, unregulated global markets (e.g. the vanilla and the sea cucumber market), and international aid organisations have triggered significant changes on the island.

I first heard about Nosy Komba four years ago, through an internship with an international aid organisation based in the Netherlands. While deepening my interest in the conceptualisation of *agency* – primarily formulated by aid workers and international volunteers as processes enabling individuals to become autonomous agents of change – I further developed a strong sense of curiosity towards women’s actual perception of their ability to perform and express individual actions. Prior to having knowledge in the field, I critically engaged with the literature on development and humanitarianism that emphasises women’s “self-realisation” as a core component for their actions. My intention was to examine women’s ability to make decisions and act in their household. The reality I encountered in the field, however, was very different from what I had expected. I soon realised that my initial focus on women’s “subordinate” position in relation to men was drawn from a certain representation of gendered relationships triggered by colonialism and often used in humanitarian and development discourses. As I started inquiring about the household structure in the village of Antintorona (Nosy Komba), I remarked that women seemed to be in charge of all the household resources, expenditures and properties. Moreover, their unstable relationships with both Malagasy partners and foreigners appeared deeply intertwined with monetary and material considerations. Most women were “single” and were living alone with (some) of their children, who very often were born from different partners.

A simplistic reading of the above would suggest that capitalism and policies of economic liberalisation inevitably transformed social structures, leading to the loosening of social and family ties. Such an assumption echoes Parry and Bloch’s (1989) famous critique of classical social theories on money, challenging overgeneralised beliefs about the consequences of monetisation and capitalism in the Global South. Drawing from the scholars Marx and Simmel, money that acts as an abstract and neutral medium makes relationships impersonal, and inevitably results in “the growth of individualism and the destruction of solidarity communities” (cited in Parry and Bloch 1989, 4). The risk here is to overlook the social and economic system in which money is incorporated and to gloss over people’s interpretation of the morality that arises from the economic exchange. Money is nothing new in Madagascar, and monetary transactions have long been essential to the formation and continuity of complex political and social structures. As Parry and Bloch (1989) further suggest, monetary transactions are embedded within different moralities. The cycle of “short-term exchange” is tied to the individual domain, while the cycle of “long-term exchange”, legitimised by obligations (and reciprocity) among kin, ensures the reproduction and continuity of the social and cosmic order (ibid., 2). As people navigate the two moral orders, they give meaning to the economic exchange as primarily oriented toward the realisation of personal interests or serving a longer collective purpose. A tight focus on “transaction relationships,” or economic exchanges in social relationships, may lead to widespread generalisations about women’s agency, especially when it denies the individual experience of engaging in transactional relationships. To overcome this dilemma, I chose to explore the singularity of women’s lived experience. I draw upon theoretical perspectives, here developed by Malmström (2012), that understand subjectivities and agency as the ability to feel, reflect, intend, and act, while taking into account the (changing) political, economic, and social systems in which they are

embedded (see also Mahmood 2001, 2005; McNay 2003, 2004; Ortner 2006).

In this article, I offer a sense of what transactional relationships mean in the lives of the women of Nosy Komba, and what it has to say about their agency. It is, therefore, less of an analysis of prevailing social norms, structures of power and inequality, than a focus on women's subjective views and voices. Through the women's lived experiences and narratives, I examine the ways in which women co-produce and navigate social relationships, as they negotiate individual motives and collective needs. More precisely, this article draws on the relationships I have built with three women over the course of three-month fieldwork in the village of Antintorona (Nosy Komba) in 2019. In line with Parry and Bloch (1989), this article begins with the assumption that relationships with kin, partners, and male foreigners are entangled with the exchange of material goods or money. However, they are shaped by different moralities. As I proceed, I emphasise women's representation of heterogeneous conceptions of affect, morality, and similarities, as they navigate ambivalent, yet complementary, social relationships in the midst of changing economic and social landscapes. In doing so, I do not mean to suggest that new forms of valuation result in the collapse of older patterns of social and economic exchanges. Nor do I intend to romanticise certain behaviours, as acts of resistance or the assertion of freedom. Instead, I approach women's agency as the ability to negotiate, experience, and interpret social interaction in a variety of creative ways.

The morality of exchanges amongst kin

The importance of morally binding relationships with (living and dead) kin is well illustrated by the story of Sita, a 29-year-old woman. Recalling her childhood growing up on Nosy Komba, Sita told me that after her mother's death, she moved at the age of five from one household to another, living with several members of her (matrilateral and patrilineal) kin group who successively took care of her. On Nosy

Komba, people usually navigate kin relationships from a very young age until the moment of their death, when they are reunited with their ancestors. The sense of belonging to a common ancestor is thought to be essential, if not necessary, to the formation of kin-based networks and collective identities. As in many parts of the country, on Nosy Komba, ancestors appear during dreams or intimate ceremony possessions. During these interactions, ancestors can ask their descendants to nourish their memory or to perform different kinds of services. Ancestors also have the ability to harm and curse. In fact, on Nosy Komba, most of the sicknesses, accidents, and deaths are attributed to ancestors. In this sense, ancestors appear as a vehicle of sanction and cooperation among kin, through which notions of affect and fear allow social and economic exchanges among members of the kin group.

Before turning to Sita's economic obligation towards her kin, I will spell out some of the rules regulating Sakalava kinship systems,¹ as reported in the twentieth century. In northwest Madagascar, the prevalence of patrilineality – notably the rules of exogamy and patrilocality – has resulted in a relative exclusion of women from the land and inheritance rights (Baré 1980).² In return, they have developed strategies to maintain relationships with people who descend from the same ancestor. Namely, the frequent separations from their husbands allow women to temporally reconnect with their patrilineal group, before engaging in a new relationship (Baré 1980). Sita's great-grandmother, for instance, had eight husbands. At the end of each marriage, she returned to the land of her father, the island of Nosy Faly, where she was eventually buried together with her ancestors. In this way, women maintain relationships with their kin, who provide them with economic security, affection, and a sense of belonging. In the face of the above, an effort must be made to avoid crystallising social patterns into a fixed set of atemporal categories, leading to confining women's agency to structural matters. Nonetheless, a brief overview of the Sakalava kinship rules through

the lens of morality does provide a historical perspective on the importance of kin-based networks in women's lives, echoing Baré's (1980) analyses of the prevalence of descent over matrimony in northwest Madagascar.

That being said, it is important to note that relationships with kin imply obligation and reciprocity, which vary significantly from one person to another over time. Kin relationships are developed through constant movements of people and money that begin at a very young age (e.g. fosterage, adoption), and develop throughout life. When I met Sita, she had been working for Stefano – an Italian aid worker – in the village of Antintorona for about thirteen years. Through various economic activities, she earned significant economic resources. Over the years, she facilitated the integration of her cousins and aunt, Vaveline, in the village of Antintorona. Moreover, she included members of her family in projects initiated by international aid organisations. Besides that, Sita directly gives money to members of her family, offers them gifts (e.g. clothes, accessories, jewellery), and supports some of their everyday expenses and social activities. All in all, she spends (at least) half of her economic income on her kin network. On Nosy Komba, there is no social security from the state. Moreover, there is very little formal employment, with the exception of people working in the tourist industry, foreigners, expatriates, or international aid organisations that develop economic activities. The networks of kin relationships enable people to ensure livelihood and basic needs. It also responds to moral obligations and expectation of reciprocity arising from and guided by ancestors.

Meanwhile, Sita's social and economic position coincides with an increased responsibility vis-à-vis her family, that she sometimes perceived as a disincentive to long-term personal investments. One day, while Sita and I were walking across the mountains of Nosy Komba, she showed me the land that she owns. She told me that although she dreamed of building a house on this land, she had no idea whether she could ever start the works. After all, she does not have

enough money for such an investment. She went on to say that she has “no freedom here” and that “[she] hope[s] her children will have a better life,” thus emphasising the fact that her desire to build a house is subordinated to her moral obligation towards her family. On other occasions, kin relationships are so important that they give a particular meaning to money. During a conversation about economic exchanges among kin, Sita sighed as she recalled that her sister used to steal money and other properties from her. Because it was her sister, someone she shares a deep connection and affection with, Sita did not explicitly mention these incidents, nor did she try to get her personal assets back. Instead, she decided to keep offering money and material goods to her sister to dissuade her from stealing in the future. “I even offered her a new phone!” Sita added, before concluding that this strategy seemed to be working well since “nothing has gone missing for a long time.” In this case, as in others, Sita never mentioned the loss of money in economic terms but found alternative ways to preserve the relationship with her sister, while ensuring that this situation would not happen again. In doing so, she demonstrates the importance of money while simultaneously undermining it. As she ignored the economic loss, Sita temporally empties the money from its capitalist function and emphasises its social component instead. Sita's moral responsibility towards her kin, reinforced by negative discourse about the “lack of freedom” or her “impossible dreams,” prevents her from spending money as she wishes. On the other hand, as she decided not to complain about, or even to mention, the loss of money, she gives a moral sense to the economic exchange in kin-based networks, emphasising, on this occasion, the social and affective ties over the possibility of fulfilling personal desires. Through discourse and actions, Sita demonstrates that the balance between collective needs and individual motives is continuously negotiated through economic exchanges.

The morality of economic exchanges in kin-based networks may serve to reproduce the “social and cosmic order” (Parry and Bloch

1989). In this frame, the purpose of long-term exchanges – primarily organised around ancestral power and kinship norms – is to ensure social cohesion among individuals. For many inhabitants of Nosy Komba, however, the nature and frequency of economic exchanges are highly unstable. Not everyone has the same ability to distribute money and material resources in kin-based networks. The economic uncertainty, driven at the same time by a lack of economic opportunities and a highly competitive (and volatile) global market, prevents or discourages most people from redistributing their economic resources to their kin. While the kin group is supposed to protect and support its members, the growing number of elderly, sick, and disabled people left alone seems to paint a rather different picture. These people who have lost, or never had, the ability to distribute economic resources, are increasingly considered as a burden for their family. Although the economic exchange is essential to shape kin relationships, money has no intrinsic value. It may serve individual purposes, such as enhancing one's social status or living standards, bringing an emotional dimension, as well as responding to collective needs. The balance of obligation and reciprocity in kin-based networks is highly unstable and asymmetrical. While some people gain a relative position of power in a kin-based network, others become increasingly vulnerable and dependent on those who have more resources. Yet, these social patterns are not fixed in time but are continuously negotiated as women navigate various relationships throughout their lives.

“Women are only interested in money”

To gain insight into the morality of exchange among partners, I will hereby recount how, after a relationship of nine years, Sita and her first husband shared their economic capital. Simply stated, “when [they] broke up, he kept the house and the land, but [she] kept all furniture, everything that was inside the house.” This is not surprising since “here, material goods belong to the woman” and the land where

they were living “belonged to [her husband's] family.” As Baré (1980) demonstrates, the repartition of economic assets in a household is historically informed. Before colonial times, all children had the right to inherit the land collectively, regardless of their gender. In practice, however, the land was mainly shared among men, owing to the absence of women engaged in (patrilocal) unions. In return, women have always owned personal properties, especially furniture, tissues, and jewellery. Colonial reforms and the rise of capitalism have triggered significant changes regarding the land tenure system and the valuation of material goods. Yet, these historical processes did not disrupt the gendered distribution of economic capital in a household. Women remain, in theory, the main owner of the household properties and they are the ones who keep the properties in the event of a separation.

Sita could not hold back a smile as she recalled an event that had happened one year ago. After separating from her husband, a woman left the island of Nosy Komba in a pirogue full of furniture, “so full that it almost sank.” The tone of Sita's voice was much more serious as she added “poor man, he was left without anything. She did not even leave a mattress!” This story echoes Ottino's accounts (1969), describing how in northwest Madagascar, women have benefited from economic changes, and enjoy an enhanced position in the household. Women increasingly take advantage of men's economic responsibility towards them, he contends, in order to accumulate economic capital. At first sight, the rules governing obligations and reciprocity in a matrimonial relationship, reaching back to pre-colonial times, are clearly defined through a gendered lens. Men have an economic responsibility towards their wife, in response to their productive and reproductive capacity. With regard to economic resources, Sita explained that:

Here, it is always the woman who keeps all the money and who decides how it will be spent (...) For your own personal expenses

as well, but then, you need to ask. When it is the money earned by the woman, there is no sharing; it is only for her. When it is for common expenses, there is no need to ask; you can spend your husband's money.

Just as past scholars documented, Sita's explanation depicts a situation where women have great economic power in the household. The reality, however, is not as straightforward as it might appear. When I asked Sita what the situation was like with her first husband, she went on to remark:

With Melanie's father, it was different. Many times, he did not want to share the money. He did not tell me where the money was nor what he was doing with it. But it is not normal. It is not how it is supposed to work.

The same story was repeated with her second husband who, not only failed to provide her with economic resources but also lied about his past and (hidden) family in order to benefit from Sita's own economic resources and social network. As she found out the truth, she left her husband, promising not to engage in other long-term relationships with men for a while, and to support her children's needs on her own. Sita's story illustrates the tension existing between men's economic obligation towards their wife, as historically informed, and the actual repartition of resources in a couple. Women are supposed to obtain money from their partner(s) in order to ensure household livelihood and expenditure, as well as to sustain kin-based networks. However, men do not always respect this principle. Very often they (secretly) spend the money earned during the day, either on drinks or on gifts for other girlfriends, before returning home. Women's ability to negotiate economic exchanges in the couple is not based on an inherent right, shaped by "traditional" kinship rules, nor does it result from a new economic order in which women have a strong economic power.

Contrary to the assumption that women increasingly take advantage of their partners' economic responsibility toward them (Ottino 1969), I argue that women's ability to negotiate economic exchanges in the couple lies with a variety of factors. The intersection of age, kinship, economic capital, and social position considerably influences how women navigate obligation and reciprocity in a couple. In the aforementioned story of Sita, we should keep in mind that, after separating from her two husbands, she had a relatively stable economic income and strong kin and social network around her. She also knew that as a 29-year old, she could easily find someone else if she wanted to. For many other women, not being supported by their husband leads to increased dependency on their kin, and when they cannot count on them either, some women almost exclusively rely on extra-marital relationships to make a living. It is, therefore, reasonable to believe that women are highly unequal in expressing agency through the money they receive from a matrimonial relationship, and in its further distribution

Generally, my research participants' accounts convey a sense of disappointment regarding their partners, criticising them for their "disinterest" and "cowardice." Sita's negative perception of her past relationships with men results from the experiences she had with her two husbands, reinforced by countless similar experiences shared by other women. A closer examination of these narratives reveals that behind the negative representation of relationships with men, formulated in economic terms, is an emotional dimension. At the end of both relationships, Sita was hurt. Not simply because her husbands did not respect their economic obligations, but because in not doing so, they negated the affective tie existing between them. Although economic exchanges in a couple are primarily formulated in terms of obligation, there is no intrinsic power that forces men to respect such obligations. As men distribute their economic resources to their wife, they give meaning to the exchange. For instance, one time, Sita's aunt, Vaveline, received the money that her husband earned during the

week. She proudly told members of her kin group and friends about it, and the topic was discussed among them until late that night. The gesture of Vaveline's husband was interpreted by her social network not so much as a response to a moral imperative embedded in gender norms, as a sign of respect and affection towards his wife.

An over-simplistic representation of obligations and reciprocity in a couple leads to widespread generalisations about women's pursuit of economic self-interest on the one hand, and men's growing disinterest toward their wife on the other. Following Cole, a focus on women's strategies to obtain economic resources through intimate relationships neglects the affective dimension of these exchanges, thus reproducing stereotypes representing African women as "purely instrumental" (2009, 111). On Nosy Komba, economic and moral exchanges seem to be less defined by the result of "traditional" patrilineal rules transformed by new forms of valuation, than by inherent tensions between competing moral orders and personal expectations. In embracing dominant historical constructs requiring men to provide them with economic resources, women assert various degrees of agency, exacerbating tensions articulated around gender norms. In the meantime, women's lived experiences reveal that the exchange of money and gifts has an emotional dimension, in which notions of jealousy, seduction, and respectability are essential to foster the relationship.

The "travail du lit" (work of the bed)

In northwest Madagascar, the recognition of women's reproductive capacity in economic terms, as well as women having more than one partner, has been described as a normalised practice, essential to mediating different lineages and enhancing one's social status, reaching far back to pre-colonial times (see Grandidier 1913). Intimate relationships between Malagasy women and foreigners are not a novelty either. In places where commercial trade and global exchanges have a long history (such as in Nosy Komba), intimate relationships

with foreigners are very common (see Cole 2010). Historical processes, including colonial reforms and the development of a capitalist economy, did not cause profound changes *per se*, nor did they impose new practices or forms of valuation. Rather they have diversified the nature and the form of the compensation received by women, as well as the meaning given to these exchanges. While husbands do not always respect what is formulated as an economic responsibility towards their wife, it is commonly accepted that lovers or boyfriends *do* provide economic support or material resources to their partners. As I was told by one of my research informants, Angela, a 32-year-old woman, the exchange of money or gifts for sex is the normal recognition for "le travail du lit", literally meaning, the work of the bed. The choice of the word "work" to describe the sexual relationship, clearly implies that financial or material compensation is expected in the short term. It also reaffirms that money and intimacy intertwine in the process of creating relationships between men and women. Offering money, jewellery, or perfumes to a girlfriend, is perceived as a mark of recognition and respect, essential for the relationship to evolve.

The importance of transactional relationships is even more accentuated with regards to foreigners. Unlike Malagasy men, who struggle more and more to provide one or several girlfriends with money or gifts, foreigners have a reputation for being wealthy. Through various relationships with foreigners, Zara, a 24-year-old woman, has accumulated a large amount of economic capital. Her boyfriends offered her money and gifts during their stays on Madagascar. Some of them even continued to send her money once they were back in their home country in order to maintain a relationship with her. Since Zara had a daughter with an (older) French man, her situation further improved. The father of her child signed the birth certificate and, since then, sends money to Zara every month. My intention in recounting the case of Zara is not to focus on or to generalise a "success story." Given that I mainly stayed in villages of

Nosy Komba that are not impacted by tourism and sex work, the women I met who had relationships with foreigners were in relatively stable unions and enjoyed a much better situation than many others who are involved in similar relationships. Having said that, I want to emphasise that the advantages of engaging in intimate relationships with foreigners are never disconnected from broader systems of economic, affective, and social exchanges.

On Madagascar, money and intimacy are not mutually exclusive, but deeply intertwined. The inclusion within a kin-based network, and its associated norms, largely determines both the way in which women spend the money earned from their relationships with men and whom it benefits. Bloch (1989) for instance, argues that in the Merina (central Madagascar), money gains value only when it is redistributed among relatives and ancestors. In this context, what matters is not the fact of receiving money through intimate relationships with men, but the ways in which individuals redistribute the money afterwards. On Nosy Komba, a large number of women who engage in transactional relationships with foreigners redistribute a portion of their economic resources to their kin. For years, Zara gave her mother a large amount of the money she earned through her relationships with foreigners. Recently, she explained that she is less inclined to do so. She went on to say that she feels “in prison” and, hence, she would like to “do more things for herself.”

In cases where women engage (and succeed) in relationships with foreigners, they may use their economic means in resourceful ways. Besides supporting her mother – although to a small extent – and investing in properties, Zara uses a portion of the money obtained from her (foreign) boyfriends to secretly support a younger (Malagasy) boyfriend who, in the Malagasy language, is called a *jaombilo*. Her Malagasy boyfriend was doing all sorts of services for her, including cooking, buying food, and washing dishes. In return, she offered him gifts and money. The phenomenon of the *jaombilo* is quickly expanding in all the major cities of Madagascar. As Cole (2010)

highlights, in these situations, gender norms are completely reversed. Money is obtained from the foreign boyfriend before being reinvested in the relationship with the *jaombilo* who, in turn, is expected to participate in household chores. The money earned from her foreign boyfriends enables Zara to assert power and control in her relationships with the *jaombilo*. Through these relationships, there is a transfer of responsibility from the man to the woman who becomes in charge of supporting her boyfriend and defines what she expects from him in return. In doing so, Zara embraces older principles of obligation and reciprocity in a couple, while defining them on her own reverse terms. When she distributes the money obtained from a foreigner to her *jaombilo*, Zara demonstrates her ability to engage in a relationship on her own terms, while being socially recognised for doing so.

In the same way that the intertwining of money and intimacy has long been perceived in the West as a threat to the creation of selfless relationships, it is commonly accepted that the association of intimacy and work jeopardises social relationships (see Zelizer 2000). In the village of Antintorona, most relationships between foreigners and Malagasy women take place in the context of “development” projects, initiated by a network of international aid organisations. In this sense, the relationships are thought to exclude any forms of intimacy. As I was told, Rita, a 28-year-old woman, was working for a couple of weeks in a garden – part of a development initiative – when she explicitly showed her interest in having sexual relations with a (male) international volunteer. The international volunteer refused to engage in sex with Rita, explaining that he was working in the project for selfless reasons. The association of sex with work was contradictory to his conception of development. After a short break, every woman who participated in the conversation started laughing and described the foreigner as “not normal, not normal at all.” Rita was already earning money through the professional activity offered by the foreigner. Although she might have expected an additional

economic income from the relationship, it is reasonable to think that it was not the economic necessity that pushed her to engage in an intimate relationship with the man. Just like social relationships are shaped by the exchange of economic resources, activities which take place in the frame of development projects have an intimate dimension. The two spheres are deeply interconnected. These women did not “use” sex in order to gain money, but were rather considering the economic opportunity provided by foreigners as the way to build intimacy, and perhaps, enjoy wider economic and social benefits in the future. The women’s reaction to this funny, yet “abnormal” situation, reinforces the idea that different conceptions of social and economic exchanges lead to widespread misconceptions of what agency means for the women of Nosy Komba. The foreigner was probably trying to do “good” in refusing to engage in a sexual relationship with a Malagasy woman. However, the assumption that transactional relationships inevitably lead to dependency and “disempowerment” of women does nothing else but to reproduce older patterns of gender imbalance, embedded into the male-biased lens from which women’s position has long been investigated.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I tried to make some women’s voices heard and to let their narratives tell us how they navigate ambivalent relationships through the lens of morality, affection, and economic exchanges. By recounting women’s experiences, I have thought to explore how economic exchanges shape and are shaped by social relationships. Despite their different life trajectories, the women of Nosy Komba experience, interpret and negotiate the tensions existing between moral obligations and personal expectations in the process of co-producing relationships. Particularly, I mean to stress that economic exchange is essential to the social reproduction of kin-based networks on which many women rely for their livelihood and security, while simultaneously producing asymmetrical relationships within their kin-

based network. The sense of belonging and the moral responsibility toward kin, children, and ancestors is the most present in women’s everyday actions. The women of Nosy Komba use resourceful strategies to obtain money or gifts, notably through intimate relationships with male partners, that they further distribute in a variety of ways, according to personal circumstances, social norms, and the relationships that are considered most meaningful.

Although women in Nosy Komba sometimes stress the “lack of freedom” that results from the moral obligation toward their kin, they are nonetheless agentive as they chose to comply or not with this obligation, or to ignore the consequences of some actions while exacerbating others. In referring to long-standing social and gender norms through discourses on normality, they do not position themselves as passive subjects to forces beyond their control. Nor do they become “emancipated subjects” as they negotiate, subject, or turn older forms of kinship and gender norms to their advantage. Rather, they continuously make sense of the interplay between their lived experience, through discourses and daily actions, and prevailing systems of social and economic exchanges embedded within broader forms of power and inequality. A shift in focus from a Western understanding of the association of money and social relationships, to the investigation of how Nosy Komba women actually experience these relationships, provides insightful perspectives on women’s heterogeneous life stories, and the ways in which they negotiate the tensions and uncertainty in changing landscapes.

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Notes

¹ The Sakalava are commonly referred to as one of the ethnic groups of Madagascar, that once formed an empire. They are mainly located in the western and northwest part of Madagascar.

² In patrilineal kinship systems, the relationships between kin are reckoned through the father's lineage. The rule of exogamy refers to the practice of marrying someone outside one's kin group. The principle of patrilocality means for a married couple to live with or near the husband's kin group

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