

Sociological Analysis of the Mob Justice Phenomenon in Cases of Cattle Theft in the District of South Amboasary, Anosy Region, Madagascar

Tsimiondreke Mahaso¹, Etienne Stefano Raherimalala², Ranjatson Jean Patrick³, Andrianjary Myriam⁴, Fidelio Arnold Ulrich⁵, Ratiarimananjatovo Narindra⁶, Robijaona Rahelivololoniaina Baholy⁷

¹ Doctoral School in Natural Resource Management and Development, Economy Politic Natural Resource, University of Antananarivo.

² Faculty of Economy, Management and Sociology, University of Antananarivo.

³ Higher School of Agricultural Science, University of Antananarivo.

⁴ Institute of Higher Education Antsirabe Vakinankaratra, University of Antananarivo.

⁵ Doctoral School in Natural Resource Management and Development, Experimental Sciences and Valorization of Natural Resource, University of Antananarivo.

⁶ Higher Normal School, University of Antananarivo. Antananarivo-Madagascar.

⁷ Full Professor in Engineering and Industrial Process, Agricultural and Food Systems, Polytechnic High School of Antananarivo, Madagascar
robijob111@gmail.com

Abstract

Two recurrent phenomena in Malgasy society, namely the flight of the overfoot track of mob justice, draw the socio-economic landscape of the southern part of Madagascar, more precisely in the district of Amboasary Atsimo, located in the Anôsy region. The main objective of this study is to understand the underlying social mechanisms, including latent socio-cultural aspects, which feed the mob justice in response to the airflow in the district of Amboasary South. The central question guiding this study is what are the social and cultural mechanisms leading to the mob justice in the case of the airflow in the district of Amboasary South? This requires in-depth analyzes of the different factors and dimensions of social and cultural dynamics that contribute to this phenomenon. Qualitative data, collected in three municipalities of the Amboasary South district, namely Amboasary, Esira and Tsivory, are the material body of the study. Considering the mob justice as a systemic, complex and multiformatic social phenomenon, various theories have been implemented for the understanding of sociological facts and punitive behaviors, such as the theory of compensation and distributional justice. Two main results emerged from this study. On the one hand, the data demonstrate that individual and social factors affect participation in the mob justice. On the other hand, the facts reveal that social standards and collective representations play a crucial role in the legitimization of popular punishment.

Keywords

Mob justice; Sociological Analyzes; Amboasary South; Cattle theft



I. Introduction

Mob justice is a chronic and ongoing phenomenon in Madagascar. This phenomenon appears to increase from north to south, affecting many areas where the population itself expresses the desire to punish various offenses, including acts of banditry. (Razafindrazaka et al., 2019). In the Amboasary South district, located in the Anôsy region, cattle theft stands out as one of the most commonly targeted crimes for mob justice, resulting in the loss of hundreds of livestock in just a span of three days (Rasoanaivo, 2012). This phenomenon prompts inquiries into issues of social justice, the validity of collective violence, and power

dynamics within society. In this paper, we conduct a comprehensive sociological examination of mob justice, focusing specifically on cases of cattle theft in the Amboasary South district. Mob justice can be characterized as an informal system of justice wherein the populace takes matters into their own hands to punish individuals they deem guilty. Typically, these individuals undergo swift condemnation through a rapid process (Rakotomovo, 2015). Mob justice often stems from a strong sense of anger and perceived injustice among a group of people towards one or more individuals, leading to collective acts of informal and often violent justice outside of legal channels (Imbiki, 2011). The phenomenon of popular vindication thus embodies both legal and social dimensions, with conflicting societal viewpoints (Alouki, 2020).

II. Research Methods

2.1 Materials

In the realm of cattle theft, historically in Madagascar around the late 15th century, the growth of herds leaned more on raiding neighboring herds than on the gradual adoption of effective herd management techniques (Fauroux, 1989). The expansion of these small groups was supported by three main pillars: military tactics, magical efficacy, and "ideological-political" prowess (Fauroux, 1989). This culturally ingrained form of theft has ancient roots in the Southern regions of Madagascar, representing a crucial transition from youth to adulthood, signifying masculine prowess (Leymarie, 1989).

Over time, this culture has evolved, giving rise to the emergence of the "dahalo" phenomenon (Wendenbaum, 2010). The tradition has turned into a scourge (www.madagascarmatin.mg), a Malagasy Wild West (www.nocomment.mg), and has transformed into deadly raids. The "dahalo" or "malaso," literally meaning "cattle thieves," are bandits who sow terror throughout Madagascar. They no longer limit themselves to cattle theft but plunder everything they can carry: they attack villages, commit atrocities against the population, rape, kill, and burn (Wendenbaum, 2010).

This situation has outraged the local population. In the district of Amboasary Sud, cattle breeders want to jealously protect their unique wealth, not only economically but also culturally. Like all Malagasy people, the inhabitants of Amboasary Sud are deeply attached to this particular animal. It symbolizes life and wealth for the living, honor and prestige for the deceased, and power and authority for the Gods (Raharolahy, 2004). Any act of theft is thus perceived as unacceptable within the community. Indeed, in the district of Amboasary Sud, cattle theft is a crime that regularly provokes mob justice in response to the inefficiency of the judicial authorities in suppressing these thefts (Razafimamonjy et al., 2019).

Remaining a century-old yet ongoing issue on an international scale, cattle theft represents one of the most challenging security problems to solve in Madagascar, persisting despite the passage of time and socio-economic and political transformations, as well as the measures taken. Particularly in the Southwest, namely in the Toliara province, the phenomenon has existed for over 70 years, experienced a decline after independence, then resumed in the 1970s (Rasamoelina, 1993).

At the national level, Madagascar faces significant challenges in terms of justice and security. The country grapples with increasing insecurity, especially in rural areas where cattle theft remains a lucrative activity for many individuals. Weaknesses in judicial

institutions, lack of resources for law enforcement, and corruption contribute to the impunity of criminals, causing frustration among the population.

In the aforementioned context, and in order to move beyond monofactorial perspectives to understand mob justice, the district of Amboasary Sud provides a complex and fascinating framework for examining social dynamics through the lens of a specific phenomenon: mob justice in response to cattle theft. This region, characterized by its rurality and rootedness in strong cultural traditions, faces socio-economic challenges that deeply influence perceptions of property, justice, and conflict resolution.

This leads us to formulate a major question: what are the social mechanisms, especially socio-cultural ones, which lead to mob justice in the case of cattle theft in the district of Amboasary Sud? To thoroughly understand and analyze this, two specific questions arise. Firstly, what are the individual and social factors influencing participation in mob justice in this context? Secondly, what role do social norms and collective representations play in legitimizing popular punishment?

The main objective of this study is to understand the social mechanisms underlying mob justice in the case of cattle theft in the district of Amboasary Sud. This primarily involves gaining an in-depth understanding of the sociological aspects, including social and cultural dynamics, fueling mob justice in the case of cattle theft in Amboasary Sud.

Two specific objectives are to be considered: identifying individual and social motivations to participate in acts of mob justice and analyzing the role played by social norms and collective representations in legitimizing popular punishment.

At the national level, the issue of mob justice sparks debates, particularly about the effectiveness of the judicial system and the social inequalities that fuel such behaviors. Indeed, many studies have shed light on the dynamics of mob justice, highlighting factors such as the perception of the illegal and informal nature of the phenomenon, its political dimension, the lack of trust in judicial authorities, social norms of solidarity and revenge, and cultural influences on informal justice practices. However, some researchers discuss the legal implications of mob justice in the Malagasy context. In the case of cattle theft in the district of Amboasary Sud, this phenomenon is particularly concerning due to its frequency and brutality.

Therefore, the sociological analysis of mob justice in the case of cattle theft in the district of Amboasary Sud requires an in-depth understanding of the specific social, economic, and cultural context of this region of Madagascar. It is time to understand and decipher the complexities of addressing cattle theft and mob justice to analyze the individual and social factors influencing participation in mob justice in this context. Emotional reactions to these acts, social pressure to participate in forms of informal justice, and complex community relations all converge to create a sociological tableau rich in nuances.

Primarily, cattle theft is not merely an economic offense but carries significant social and cultural dimensions. Hypothetically, social norms and collective representations play an important role in legitimizing popular punishment. By thoroughly analyzing the phenomenon, it is imperative to delve into the intricacies of local culture, explore the foundations of norms and value systems regarding the judicial system in people's daily lives. Mob justice, as a complex social phenomenon, requires a deep understanding of social norms and representations for a nuanced understanding of the legitimization of the phenomenon and to envision sociologically informed solutions to address the underlying issues.

2.2 Methods

In order to sociologically analyze this phenomenon, we conducted a qualitative study in the field, based on semi-structured interviews with residents of the region, local authorities, and law enforcement members. Additionally, participant observations were conducted during gatherings of mob justice.

Within the framework of our sociological analysis, we conducted a qualitative study among the inhabitants of the district of Amboasary Sud to better understand the mechanisms and motivations underlying mob justice in the case of cattle theft. We observed that this phenomenon is often perceived as a means of deterrence and social restitution, aiming to punish the thief and restore moral order within the community.

For sampling purposes, three municipalities in the District of Amboasary Sud were chosen, namely Amboasary, Esira, and Tsivory, out of the 14 municipalities in the district. These three municipalities are particularly known as red zones with frequent attacks by cattle thieves and among the most difficult to access due to insecurity.

The studied population consists of livestock breeders, with an estimated proportion of breeders who have been victims of cattle theft in the district of Amboasary Sud at 93%, calculated using the sampling technique formula where t = confidence level of the confidence rate (i.e., $t = 1.96$ for a confidence rate of 95%) divided by margin of error (i.e., e = margin of error set at 5%).

Below is the distribution of surveyed breeders based on the number of cattle lost.

Table 1. Distribution of surveyed breeders according to the number of cattle lost

| The frequency of theft | Number of livestock farmers (n=100) | Percentage (%) | IC 95% % |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|
| 1 | 79 | 83,2 | 74,1 – 90,1 |
| 2 | 12 | 12,6 | -6,7 -21 |
| 3 | 3 | 3,2 | 0,7 -9 |
| 4 | 1 | 1,1 | 0 -5,7 |

On average, the number of cattle lost in Amboasary Sud is 6 ± 4 , ranging from 2 to 24 with a mode of 4. The number of cattle lost is grouped in increments of five. The distribution is illustrated in the following table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of cattle theft and number of victim farmers

| The frequency of theft | Number of Livestock Farmers (n=100) | Percentage % | IC 95% % |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1 | 37 | 38 ,9 | 29,1 – 49,5 |
| 2 | 34 | 35,8 | 26,2 -46,3 |
| 3 | 17 | 17,9 | 10,8 -27,1 |
| 4 | 12 | 8,4 | 3 -14,6 |

The general approach adopted is characterized by a bottom-up approach. This analytical process examines basic, empirical data such as observed realities, survey and interview data, as well as documentary information on attitudes, feelings, emotions, and behaviors of livestock farmers in situations of theft on a daily basis.

To understand the phenomenon of mob justice sociologically, it is essential to refer to several key concepts in sociology. Firstly, the theory of distributive justice, which posits that individuals judge whether goods are distributed fairly or unfairly within a society. Secondly, the theory of social retribution, which suggests that individuals tend to react

punitively when they feel aggrieved or victimized by injustice. In the specific case of mob justice, the sociology of deviance and criminal justice offer tools to understand the mechanisms behind this phenomenon.

Finally, theories explaining social norms, such as descriptive and injunctive norms, individualism and holism, theories of collective representations, and cultural relativism, play a role in legitimizing popular punishment

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 Results

a. The individual and social factors that influence participation in mob justice

Our data demonstrate that cattle theft is not merely an economic offense but carries significant social and cultural dimensions. Firstly, the emotional reactions to these acts, the social pressure to participate in forms of informal justice such as mob justice, indicate that the population's response to such crimes is often marked by a strong sense of anger and injustice. When cattle theft occurs, villagers feel not only economically harmed but also humiliated in their integrity and honor. This dual moral and material injury fuels the desire for vengeance and swift justice, which can be interpreted as a survival reaction in these areas weakened by drought and chronic malnutrition.

Moreover, on a socio-economic level, rural areas like the Amboasary Sud district face major economic challenges due to chronic poverty, which can influence social perceptions of life in general as well as property and reactions to livestock theft.

From an administrative and legal perspective, on-the-ground realities demonstrate that mob justice stems from the failure of local security actors, lack of access to formal justice, and lack of trust in the state system as a whole, especially the judiciary, security maintenance organs, and administration in general. In particular, the inefficiency of formal justice in handling cattle theft cases reinforces the recourse to mob justice. The region's inhabitants have lost confidence in judicial authorities and prefer to take justice into their own hands, even at the risk of committing acts of extreme violence.

Emotional reactions to cattle theft, such as anger, frustration, and fear, may play a role in the rise of mob justice. The expressions "maimbo ra" (lit. bad smell of blood) and "mafana ra" (lit. hot blood) denote these emotional reactions when a crowd rushes to any collective manifestations, including mob justice

b. The role of social norms and collective beliefs in justifying mob punishment

The rural commune of Tsivory, influenced by the Bara ethnic group, has a majority population of Bara descendants of Zafindravola (Manjakahery, 2019; Cream, 2013). Around 70 to 80% of the population in the Tsivory area belong to the Bara ethnic group, with the remaining 15 to 30% being Tandroy (Cream, 2013). Other ethnic groups such as Betsileo, Mahafaly, Tanôsy, Tanala, Antesaka, and Merina are minorities, comprising about 3% of the population (Cream, 2013).

Our data reveals that mob justice in cases of cattle theft in the Amboasary South district is largely motivated by cultural factors.

Historically, the Bara ethnic group, dominant in the Amboasary South district, is known for a tradition based on the principle of "woman-zebu-masculinity," reflected in the expression "halatse aomby hala-draza" (literally, stealing cattle, stealing ancestral heritage). They demonstrated strength and courage in everything they did, identifying themselves as "Baralahy" (Bara males) to express their physical warrior strength and daily

determination (Randriamarolaza, 1986). Apart from cattle theft, the ringa illustrates this indomitable strength.

Currently, these social groups in Amboasary South, like most groups in the southern part of Madagascar, have their own system of security governance. This involves a form of peaceful social regulation for conflict management and resolution, based on collective governance under the tamarind tree or "Kabary ambany kily" (discourse under a tamarind tree), which is a form of collective trial involving local dignitaries and authorities.

Interview data indicate that throughout history, society has consistently taken measures to address wrongdoing. In instances of theft in Amboasary South, societal punishment varies based on the gravity of the offense. For example, a murder is equivalent to a punishment of delivering at least 30 cattle heads. Traditionally, for cattle theft specifically, the punishment requires double the number of stolen cattle, with additional heads as compensation. In these areas characterized by extensive and isolated dry environments, collective punishment of thieves is made possible through solidarity, mutual aid, and social cohesion. Enduring the same fate, herders are often compelled to act collectively in response to cattle theft. In summary, the communal retribution against cattle thieves is viewed as a time-honored and culturally acceptable practice, seen as an indispensable and effective method by rural inhabitants to reinstate order and foster trust within their society.

3.2 Discussion

Cattle theft and the ensuing phenomenon of mob justice present complex socio-economic, cultural, and legal challenges in rural Madagascar, particularly in regions like Amboasary South. In these areas, where cattle ownership holds immense cultural significance and represents a primary source of livelihood, the theft of livestock is not merely an economic crime but a profound assault on the social fabric and communal identity of local communities. As a response to perceived injustices, communities often resort to extrajudicial forms of punishment, including mob justice, to address cattle theft and uphold social order.

This phenomenon is far more complex than it may initially appear. In-depth analyses of the phenomenon, utilizing empirical data, allow for an exploration beyond mere diversity of incidents and economic transgressions, unraveling the nuances of collective emotional and impulsive responses, cultural dynamics, community pressures, and the choices between formal and informal justice. They provide an innovative understanding: systemic and multifactorial, of the socio-anthropological substrates driving Malagasy rural communities, weakened by environmental crisis and food insecurity, in their quest for survival. The following points are essential to consider for this research:

a. Cultural Significance of Cattle Ownership

In Malagasy society, particularly in rural areas like Amboasary South, cattle ownership holds immense cultural significance. Cattle are not only a source of economic wealth but also symbols of social status, prestige, and cultural identity. The theft of cattle is perceived as a direct assault on the livelihoods and honor of individuals and communities. This cultural attachment to cattle amplifies the emotional response to theft and fuels a collective sense of outrage and desire for retribution.

b. Socio-Economic Challenges and Vulnerability

Rural communities in Madagascar face significant socio-economic challenges, including poverty, food insecurity, and environmental crises such as droughts and

desertification. These challenges render rural populations particularly vulnerable to the impacts of cattle theft, as livestock often represent a primary source of livelihood and sustenance. In such contexts, individuals may resort to theft as a means of survival, further exacerbating tensions within communities and contributing to the prevalence of mob justice as a form of social control.

c. Role of Social Norms and Collective Representations

Mob justice in response to cattle theft is deeply rooted in cultural norms and collective representations within Malagasy communities. Traditional practices of communal decision-making, often conducted under sacred trees or through consensus-based deliberation, underscore the communal nature of justice and reinforce community solidarity. The collective punishment for cattle theft, guided by customary norms and values, is perceived as a legitimate means of maintaining social order and deterring future offenses.

d. Implications for Rule of Law and Social Cohesion

While mob justice may offer a sense of immediate justice and retribution for victims of cattle theft, it also raises significant concerns regarding the rule of law, human rights, and social cohesion. Reliance on extrajudicial forms of punishment undermines trust in formal legal institutions and perpetuates cycles of violence and retaliation. Moreover, mob justice often results in human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings and the denial of due process, further eroding trust in the judicial system and exacerbating social divisions within communities.

e. Addressing Root Causes and Promoting Conflict Resolution

To effectively address the phenomenon of mob justice in response to cattle theft, it is essential to address underlying socio-economic challenges such as poverty, food insecurity, and environmental degradation. Community-based approaches that empower local populations, promote conflict resolution mechanisms, and strengthen formal legal institutions are critical for promoting social justice, cohesion, and the rule of law. By addressing root causes and promoting inclusive and participatory approaches to conflict resolution, communities can mitigate the prevalence of mob justice and foster sustainable peace and development.

IV. Conclusion

In light of the in-depth analyses conducted on the phenomenon of mob justice related to cattle theft in the district of Amboasary South, several enlightening conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, it is evident that this complex phenomenon has its roots in multiple factors, ranging from socio-economic dynamics to ancient cultural traditions, and institutional shortcomings.

The data have highlighted the crucial importance of cultural elements in perpetuating mob justice. The tradition of cattle theft, historically inherited, has evolved into a means of socially and culturally regulating the community. The collective sanctions imposed on thieves reflect how the society of Amboasary South perceives justice and restitution. These practices are often rooted in solidarity, mutual aid, and social cohesion, underscoring the perceived need for an infallible system to maintain order and restore trust within the community.

Furthermore, the data have also revealed significant shortcomings at the level of formal institutions. The inefficiency of the judicial system, lack of resources for law enforcement, and corruption have contributed to the impunity of criminals, thereby pushing the population towards informal forms of justice, such as mob justice. The loss of trust in judicial authorities has created a void that the population fills through often violent collective actions.

Ultimately, this study offers a systemic and multifactorial understanding of the underlying issues surrounding mob justice in the context of cattle theft in Amboasary South. It underscores the need to address this phenomenon holistically, taking into account cultural, economic, social, and legal aspects to develop tailored solutions. The research highlights the complexity of Malagasy realities, revealing profound challenges but also opportunities for the development of sociologically informed strategies to meet the needs of these communities striving for survival.

References

- Alouki, Y. A. (2020). La vindicte populaire, entre justice et vengeance. Groupe Montesquieu, <https://geouroupe-montesquieu.blogspot.com/2020/01/la-vindicte-populaire-entre-justice-et.html>
- Barthoux, G. (2008). Relativisme culturel. L'école à l'épreuve des cultures, <https://www.cairn.info/l-ecole-a-l-epreuve-des-cultures--9782130571445-page-19.htm>
- Brodeur, J.-P. (1997). Justice distributive et justice rétributive, *Philosophiques*. DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202027425ar>
- CREAM. (2013), Monographie, Région Anosy
- Demeulenaere, P. (2003). Normes sociales, individualisme et holisme, *Les normes sociales*
- Fauroux, E. (1989). Les éleveurs du sud-ouest malgaches. *Etats et sociétés nomades. Politique Africaine*, (34), 63-73
- Forsé, M. & Parodi, M. (1988). Justice distributive. La hiérarchie des principes selon les Européens. *Revue de l'OFCE*
- Imbiki, A. (2011). Fokonolona " et le "dina", Institutions traditionnelles modernisées au service de la Sécurité Publique et de la Justice populaire à Madagascar. *Jurid'ika*
- Leymarie, Ph. (1989). Opération sécuritaire, contre les voleurs de zébus. *Monde diplomatique*
- Lianawati, E. & Pou, E. (2019). Représentations collectives vs sociales : Cinq critiques envers le concept des représentations collectives <https://unbeaumelange.wordpress.com/2019/07/304>
- Manjakahery, B. (2019). Royaumes Bara et esclavage au XIXe siècle. *Revue historique de l'Océan Indien*, <https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-03247110>
- Moscovici, S. (1989). Des représentations collectives aux représentations sociales : élément pour une histoire
- Raharolahy, L. (2004). Le bœuf dans la société traditionnelle malgache
- Rajaonarivelo, M. (2015). Les dimensions culturelles de la vindicte populaire à Madagascar. *Revue Malgache d'Ethnologie*, 30(3), 68-82
- Rakotomalala, T. (2016). Les aspects juridiques de la vindicte populaire à Madagascar. *Revue de Droit Malgache*, 15(4), 102-117.
- Rakotomavo, V. N. (2015). La justice populaire face au droit pénal, Mémoire de Master

- Rakotondrabe, L., & Randriamparany, J. (2016). Les mécanismes de régulation sociale à Madagascar : le cas de la vindicte populaire. *Revue malgache de sciences sociales*, 27, 102-117.
- Rakotondrabe, M. (2016). Les dynamiques de la justice informelle à Madagascar : le cas de la vindicte populaire. *Sociétés et Cultures Malgaches*, 18(3), 67-79
- Randriamarolaza, L. P. (1986). Elevage et vol de boeufs en pays Bara : la dimension socioculturelle. *Recherche pour le Développement-Série Science de l'Homme et de la société*.
- Randrianasolo, J.-L. (2022). L'insécurité grandissante et la Vindicte populaire : la région d'Amboasary Sud confrontée aux vols de bovins. *Journal de Madagascar*
- Rasamoelina, H. (1993). Vol des bœufs en pays Betsileo, *Politique africaine*, pp. 22-23
- Rasoanaivo, N. (2012). Madagascar : 109 voleurs de bétails ont été tués en trois jours, *opinion internationale, Opinion International*
- Ravelomanantsoa, V. (2014). Les enjeux politiques de la lutte contre le vol de bœufs à Amboasary sud. *Politique et Société à Madagascar*, 22(3), 76-91
- Razafimamonjy et al., (2019). Se faire justice soi-même, une solution par défaut à Madagascar, *Afrobarometer*,
- Robert, Ph. & Faugeron, Cl. (1973). Représentations du système de justice criminelle. *Acta Criminologica*. DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/01705ar>
- Sardan, J.-P. O. de (1995). La politique du terrain. Sur la production des données en anthropologie, « La politique du terrain ». *Enquête*, DOI : 10.4000/enquete.263
- Tenaerts, M.-N. (2008). *Approche sociologiques de la déviance*
- UNICEF (2021). *Définitions des normes sociales et de concepts*
- Wendenbau, E., (2010). Dahalo. *Activités Environnementales, Sciences et Exploration Naturévolution*
- www.madagascarmatin.mg
- www.nocomment.mg