

Kabary*

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1 Preamble

“Well, listen up please:
Does everyone snatch the word,
or seize the *kabary*? . . .
The word has not snatched,
and the *kabary* has not seized,
because it is like a well of Antananarivo:
the first comer can fill to the brim,
the latecomer does not acquire half full.
So do not worry, since I will be replete today
but not half full. . . .”

2 What is Kabary?

Most of Malagasy customs are baffling to outsiders, and it is knotty to describe them. We have 18 tribes in our country and each tribe has their own specific culture. Nevertheless, *kabary* is common for all tribes. *Kabary*—pronounced Kabar—refers to Malagasy oratory plied by the *mpikabary*—the orator—during any social or family gathering such as political assembly, wedding, *famadihana*, burial, funeral, or condolence. *Kabary* involves using word play and Malagasy proverbs—as in the script I have cited in the preamble, which shows a lucid translation of an opening part in a kabary. I will try to describe in this material *kabary* in general without mentioning the specific way of doing it in a particular tribe.

3 Definitions

Kabary denotes verbal communication addressed in high voice to an assembly.

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The word *kabary* can be complemented as follows: *mikabary*, *mikabaria*, *kabaria*, *kabario*, *ikabariana*, *fikabary*, *mampikabary*, *mpikabary*, *voakabary*.

4 Origin of the Word Kabary

The word *kabary* comes from the Malay *Cabary*, the Jahavaney *kabar*, the Arabic *kabar*—which means new thing—and the Soahily *khabar* or *h'abari*.

Even though the word *kabary* has multiple origins, this particular custom exists only in Malagasy culture.

5 Kabary and Word Play

In general, *kabary* is undertaken by qualified people known as *mpikabary*. They give the talk wholly in Malagasy language and frame the theme using word play to avoid stating directly the issue of the talk. In his article *In kabary the point is to avoid the point*, Harman points out that it is forbidden in *kabary* to broach directly the subject or point of the conversation. The *mpikabary* should, therefore know and ply a lot of Malagasy proverbs and idioms during their talk.

To illustrate the use of word play, let me take as an example the opening part of a *kabary* that I put in the preamble.

- ... *Does everyone snatch the word, or seize the kabary?* This is a typical speech used when the *mpikabary* is the 5th or 6th person who speaks, and with this sentence she refers to the previous speakers.
- *The word has not snatched, and the kabary has not seized.* The *mpikabary* wants to state here that the previous orators did not tell everything, so there's always something new to say. Note that all of the *mpikabary* during a gathering want to speak early because if they speak late, they will intend to repeat the word play that has already been used. Therefore, a good *mpikabary* is the one who always finds new word play to use even though she speaks late.
- *Because it's like a well of Antananarivo: the first comer can fill to the brim, and the latecomer does not acquire half full.* This Malagasy proverb means we do not need to rush in order to obtain something since there are substantial amounts of it. By using this proverb, *mpikabary* guarantees there are plenty of things to be said, so she will not repeat the previous orators' words but will give the crowds something new.
- *So do not worry, since I will be replete today but not half full.* Again, the *mpikabary* promises that the talk will be brimmed with new word plays that have not been used by prior orators.

During a wedding ceremony, there is a contest between the *mpikabary* of the groom and the one of the bride. So if an orator does not use an impressive word play, or just repeats the words used by the other, the ceremony can be shelved.

This kind of contest also occurs during the *hira gasy* show which is a classic heady brew of music, dance and *kabary*.

6 The Way of Doing Kabary

There is almost always *kabary* in any Malagasy gathering. The way of doing it depends on the occasion; even so, the beginning of a *kabary* should be marked by two main steps, regardless of the event.

First, the orators should offer their apologies to the crowd since they speak in front of elderly people, especially if they are young. In our custom it's the elders who should give a speech, so one will appear discourteous if one give a talk in front of them without apologizing. Next, the *mpikabary* ought to thank God and the ancestors for the occasion. We Malagasy still believe the blessing of God and the ancestors, so we always thank them before commencing any important ceremony. The orator can start the actual talk only after completing those two steps.

In general, *Kabary* is done at the beginning of the event, and at the end in order to thank the people who gathered. All the same, there are some exceptions depending on where the occasion happens. For instance, in the region of Fandriana, during the *famadihana*—a Malagasy custom of giving new shrouds to the dead—the *kabary* is done after preparing the food and meal for the invited people, that is, more or less in the middle of the event.

As I mentioned before, *kabary* is traditionally carried out by the elders. Still, there exist today young professional *mpikabary* that can be hired for a particular event or ceremony, thanks to many training center that instruct young students in *kabary*.

7 Idioms Related to *Kabary*

I give you bellow some idioms related to *Kabary* with their English translation.

- *Atao an-kabary*: a matter that should be discussed privately, instead it has been aired so that the public knows about it.
- *Azon-kabary*: the situation where someone comes to your home and wants to quarrel with you.
- *Be kabary*: someone who likes arguing and loses their temper easily.
- *Kabary be molotra*: a woman who dazzles someone with her fascinating talk.
- *Kabarim-behivavy*: a confusing debate during which all participants speak at the same time and raise their voices.
- *Kabary miaramila*: an order that should be executed right away without discussion, like a military order.

- *Kabary miezinezina*: a kind of kabary given when some important thing happens in the country—like the one given by Philbert Tsiranana at Mahamasina when he was elected President of Madagascar.
- *Kabary tsara pasoka*: a captivating kabary.
- *Kabary am-panambadiana*: call and response talk in a wedding ceremony between the bride's orator and the one of the groom. The groom or the bride might be represented by one or several orators depending on the family's custom.
- *Kabary am-pandevenana*: talk given during a funeral ceremony, used for telling the story of the dead person and for expressing gratitude to the crowds.
- *Kabarim-pokonolona*: meeting between the population and the mayor in order to confer about rules and regulations or to make a judgment. Note that long time ago there was no tribunal in Madagascar, so every verdict was only given during a *kabarim-pokonolona*.
- *Kabarin'adala*: a blether.
- *Kabarin'andriana*: gathering the population and announcing the new regulation. This is the only way of announcing the rules and regulation before the existence of Malagasy writing, that is before the LMS protestant missionaries introduced the written Malagasy.
- *Kabarin'ny mpanao hira gasy*: a talk given by the *hira gasy* players in order to give an overview of their show. They'd learned the whole talk by heart before giving it.
- *Kabarin-gisa*: a *kabary* during which you cannot hear anything because of the clamor.
- *Kabarin-tzahona*: a *Kabary* nonsense and clamorous.
- *Kabary tsy valiana*: a talk similar to a preacher's sermon which is also called *fiadin'ny kanosa* or coward's way.
- *Kabary ambony vavahady*: talk given during a demonstration in order to divulge the secret of the Administration.
- *Kabary anelekelan-trano*: resolving a disagreement among a community between themselves instead of taking the case to court.
- *Kabary lava*: rebuking someone continuously throughout the day.
- *Kabary tsy efa*: ceaseless disagreement.
- *Kabary tsara lahatra = kabary tsara pasoka*: impeccable talk.

- *Kabary tsy efan-kalahady*: disagreement that cannot be settled by making simple apology, instead it needs the intervention of the elders or even the court.
- *Lava kabary*: rebuking someone everyday even for making little mistake.
- *Mahay mikabary*: a kabary done by a skilled orator.
- *Mitondra kabary*: spokesperson of the Administration.
- *Tsy misy kabary*: a disagreement that has been settled without quarreling.
- *Vita kabary*: used to say that your differences with someone were settled.
- *Zanak'omby tsy ampianarin-domano, zanak'andriana tsy ampianarin-kabary*: used to say that you have the skill in something without learning it.

8 Acknowledgment

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