



DOWRY AMONG FISHERS IN TRANQUEBAR, SOUTH INDIA

**A study of an ethnographic collection
of material objects from 1981 and
life-story interviews from 2007**

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Young women wearing a half sari common for unmarried girls in the fishermen community in 1981. Drawing by Elsebet Morville 1985 after a photo taken by Esther Fihl 1981.

Authors note

This article would not have been possible had it not been for Esther Fihl and her willingness to grant me access to unpublished source material such as handwritten museum entries, reports and life-story interviews. This article is based on these sources more than anything, and I am most grateful for her invaluable help. Additionally, I would like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers as well as Esther Fihl for their comments and corrections on earlier drafts versions of this article.

English abstract

DOWRY AMONG FISHERS IN TRANQUEBAR, SOUTH INDIA: A study of an ethnographic collection of material objects from 1981 and life-story interviews from 2007.

In this publication, I compare dowry in the fishing community of Tranquebar – or Tharangambadi as it is also called - in 1981 and 2007. I do this on the basis of ethnographer Esther Fihl's collection of material objects from 1981, and some of her life-story interviews from 2007. The aim is to discuss the structural aspects of dowry as well as the pace of dowry inflation. I argue that the systems of dowry in 1981 and 2007 share a series of structural similarities relating to issues of class, social status and social mobility. However, the dowries in and of themselves have changed; they have grown bigger and the items have been adapted to modern consumption. I conclude that this change happened gradually before the tsunami in 2004 and rapidly in the post-tsunami period, as Tranquebar experienced an influx of relief money. A high level of social mobility within the fishing community is depicted in girl-families in both 1981 and 2007, where a daughter's upwards mobility was more likely if she had a low number of sisters and her downwards mobility was more likely if she had a high number of sisters. Social mobility is similarly depicted in the reconstructing period after the tsunami in Tranquebar, where families with a high number of men were more likely to experience upwards mobility than families with a low number of male members.



Tranquebar Initiativet

Dansk resumé

MEDGIFT I FISKERSAMFUNDET I TRANQUEBAR, SYDINDIEN: Et studie baseret på en etnografisk genstandssamling fra 1981 og interviews fra 2007.

I denne artikel undersøger og sammenligner jeg medgiftssystemet i Tranquebars fiskerlandsbydel gennem en genstandssamling fra 1981 og en serie livshistorie-interviews fra 2007, begge indsamlet af etnografen Esther Fihl. Mit fokus er på de strukturelle aspekter af medgiftssystemet samt inflation i medgiften. Det konkluderes, at mange af de strukturelle sammenhænge, som påvirker medgift, findes i fiskersamfundet i Tranquebar i både 1981 og 2007, f.eks. klasseforskelle, social mobilitet, social status og i de enkelte familier også nogle gange en grad af forandring i størrelsen af økonomisk indtægt på tværs af generationer. Imidlertid påvises det også, at medgiften er blevet større, og genstandene, som gives i medgift, har ændret sig til at inkludere moderne forbrugsgoder.

Det konkluderes, at ændringerne i medgift er foregået jævnt frem mod slutningen af 2004, hvorefter udviklingen gik rivende hurtigt. Tsunamien i det Indiske Ocean i december 2004 ramte fiskerlandsbyen hårdt og medførte store tab af menneskeliv og enorme ødelæggelser. I kølvandet på dette modtog mange fiskerfamilier nødhjælp og kompensation for tab af familiemedlemmer, hus og fiskeudstyr. Høj nedadgående mobilitet ses i både 1981 og 2007, når det kommer til familier med mange døtre, idet det er sværere for dem at skaffe penge til medgift. På samme måde ses den høje mobilitet i Tranquebar i rekonstruktionsperioden, der efterfulgte tsunamien, hvor familier med mange mandlige fiskere oplevede opadgående mobilitet, idet nødhjælpen blev fordelt efter en traditionel kønsopdeling.

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Introduction

In the fishing community in the village of Tranquebar, also named Tharangampadi, a traditionally arranged marriage usually includes a dowry agreement where parents of the bride and groom decide what kind of marriage arrangements they may agree upon. This dowry agreement, however, may turn out to be a hard financial burden on some families, but also a decisive factor of how well a daughter will be able to marry.¹

Historically in south India, dowries often acted as a substitute for an inheritance and a bride would receive gifts of land, jewelry or money upon her marriage in the same way as a son would inherit.² Economist Siwan Anderson argues that dowry payments have existed in most developed countries at some point in time but believes that the systems of dowry have varied and changed, for instance depending on economic and societal circumstances.³ Many researchers have looked at dowries in South Asia, and tried to explain why economic growth and modernization have not diminished the system yet, as it happened in Europe.⁴

In this article I analyze the system of dowry in the fishing community in Tranquebar in 1981, and try to take a closer look at the specific economic and societal circumstances related to dowries. My first goal is to account for how the system of dowry functioned in the fishing community of Tranquebar in 1981 by looking at a Danish collection of material objects that reflect parts of the dowry system. My second goal is to compare the system of dowry in 1981 with that of the post-tsunami era in Tranquebar by looking at a collection of life-story interviews from 2007. My third goal is to discuss the pace of dowry inflation as well as social mobility in Tranquebar. In my article, I have defined dowry, as a form of direct marriage payment where parents give jewelry and or effects to their daughter to follow her into marriage and thus be available for her husband and family-in-law.⁵ I see the system of dowry

¹ *DR2 Temaafsten*. 1. September 2007. Danish national television broadcast on Tranquebar.

² Sheel (1999) pp. 46-48.

³ Anderson (2007a) p. 151.

⁴ *The Economist* (2003).

⁵ Edlund (2006) argues that it can be useful to differentiate between gross dowry, that being items included in the bride's dowry upon marriage, and net dowry, that being the bride's items when the bridewealth have been deducted. In this article I only look at gross dowry and the development that have occurred there.

as related to underlying economic, social, cultural and political factors that permits the existence and continuation of dowries.

This article is mainly based on ethnographical fieldwork material and literature produced by Danish ethnographer Esther Fihl on the group of fishermen belonging to a caste called *Meenavar Pattanavar*. They constituted the biggest occupational group in Tranquebar in 1981 and consisted of around 5000 people.⁶ My main source is her ethnographic collection of approximately 230 material objects established in 1981 for the Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus, Denmark and her handwritten unpublished artifact descriptions, henceforth called museum entries.⁷ The collection reveals the daily work practices in and around fisher households in Tranquebar and includes items that reflect the system of dowry. Besides what this collection is able to tell in and of itself, I have used two principal written sources to support me in my analysis of dowry. First, an unpublished report in Danish loosely translated into *Fishers in Tranquebar – An ethnographic fieldwork study of the socio-economic living conditions* written by Fihl in 1981 on the basis of her ethnographic fieldwork. Secondly, a collection of educational texts in Danish loosely translated into *With Fishers in Tranquebar* written by Fihl in 1983 as part of an educational box set travelling among schools and containing a sample of the collected material objects along with posters and photographs taken in Tranquebar.⁸ This was part of her dissemination for children and was organized by the UNESCO school project hosted by Moesgaard Museum. While the collection of material objects and the texts from the early 1980s mentioned above are my main empirical sources, and also the foundation for my analysis, my discussion is supplemented by another unpublished empirical source from Tranquebar – a selection of transcriptions of life-story interviews conducted by Fihl in 2007. These interviews illustrate

⁶ In 1981, the fishers themselves preferred to use *Chettiar* as the name of their caste or social group, since it indicates a higher status in the south Indian society. However, this is not accepted by the remaining society in Tranquebar. Fihl (1983), II pp. 4-5.

⁷ These artifacts are organized with Moesgaard Museum's numbers in the inventory registration. Hereafter: Unpublished museum entry, Moesgaard Museum's artifact's number. For instance: Unpublished museum entry EA 344 120.

⁸ The title of the unpublished Danish report is *Fiskerne i Tranquebar – En etnografisk feltundersøgelse af de socio-økonomiske eksistensbetingelser*. The title of the Danish collection of educational texts is *Hos Fiskerne i Tranquebar*.

the development of dowries since the 1980s in Tranquebar.⁹

Much of my analysis is based on literature Fihl has written on the basis of the research she has conducted in the fishing community of Tranquebar for over 35 years. However, I have also included other researchers with knowledge about dowry in south Asia as well, and in my discussion, I try to relate these researchers' arguments to my understanding of the dowry system in Tranquebar.

My article is divided into three sections; one methodological section, one analytical section and one discussion section. The first section describes the methodological considerations involved in Fihl's collection of material objects in 1981. The second section presents my analysis of dowry items as well as what they reflect culturally, economically and socially. The third section includes my discussion, where I try to compare the dowry system in 1981 with the system that has developed after the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. I shall further discuss the pace of dowry inflation and social mobility as expressed in the interviews from 2007. Finally, I have included a catalog of dowry items from 1981 at the end of the article.

My main argument is, that the contents of dowry have changed from 1981 to 2007, but that the system remains the same.

I. The establishing of an ethnographic collection in 1981

In the spring of 1981, the Danish ethnographer Esther Fihl collected around 230 artifacts during her first fieldwork in the fishing community in Tranquebar/Tharangampadi. Much has changed locally since then, and these artifacts are now of historic importance, as they reflect a cultural and societal context very different from the present one. In general, artifacts can be used as historical sources, as they tell us something about how, why and with what incentive the population used them.¹⁰ Thus, the 1981 collection is able to reveal important aspects of the fishing community in Tranquebar, such as

⁹ As part of the Tranquebar Initiative (2004-2016) of the National Museum of Denmark, I worked as a trainee with Professor Esther Fihl in the fall of 2015, digitalizing and editing her handwritten museum entries from 1981, and by listening to her and discussing with her, I gained a detailed knowledge of the items and their cultural context. I am grateful of her consent that I may use her material for this publication.

¹⁰ *Den Lille Guldbog Om Kildekritik*, Statens Arkiver (2014).

facets of the local dowry system.¹¹ When using any historical artifacts, it is necessary to consider the methodology behind the creation of the collection, for instance whether or not the collection emphasizes certain aspects of society. One way to examine this is to look at Fihl's research questions as well as the guidelines she received from Moesgaard Museum previous to collecting.

Fihl's main objective in Tranquebar was to examine socio-economic livelihoods in the fishing community, for instance by looking at different types of cooperation in fishing. She focused on research questions related to patterns of production, distribution and consumption among fishers, comparing and contrasting the economic and cultural position of theirs with the rest of the population in Tranquebar.¹² Her instructions from Moesgaard Museum were not written down, but presented orally: the collected items to



Fig. 1. From the scene of collecting in 1981 where a fish vendor, who was one of Esther Fihl's interlocutors, had fetched decorated wedding pots from a pottery in the next village and insured that the motifs would be ones preferred among fisher families.

Photo by Esther Fihl 1981, Tranquebar.

¹¹ Fihl (1983), III p. 1.

¹² Fihl (1981a) p. 2.

be brought home should illustrate daily work processes and reflect the topic she would choose as central to her ethnographical fieldwork.¹³

Studying Fihl's entries of the material objects and her early reports and writings, it can be reasonably concluded that the above research questions and broad guidelines do reflect the outcome of her study in 1981. The focus is on livelihood in the fishing community and daily work processes. Even though her research questions concerning the socio-economic aspects of living and Moesgaard's guidelines have affected the themes of the collection, her collection of material objects is able to reflect on other themes such as dowry as well. This means that, although I am aware of the bias found in the collection's outset, I was still able to analyze material objects related to dowry, as they were an important part of the fishing community's socio-economic situation. However, the collection's limitations entail a prominence of material objects, which excludes some important indicators of marriage payment, such as cash. As a result of this it has been very difficult to determine the real value of dowry, and consequently I had to analyze dowry in a way that excluded money.

For the purpose of this article I have used two terms to describe families in the fishing community of Tranquebar; *relatively well-off fishing families* and *relatively poor fishing families*, respectively. The term relatively well-off fishing family is misleading, since essentially every fishing family had a very low standard of living in the 1980's and poverty was prevalent. However, these two relative terms are useful when talking about the collection of material objects. The collection's material objects include everything from kitchen utilities such as pots of clay or brass and basketry made from seagrass, to clothing, jewelry, pictures and magazines. However, some of the items in the collection might only be found in a relatively well-off fishing household, such as make-up, magazines and posters, and therefore the collection as a whole help illustrate a relatively well-off fishing family in 1981 rather than a relatively poor fishing family, that hardly would possess any items. This grouping should not affect the methodology in my article, as the system of dowry is already tied with financial standings and class variations within the fishing community at its outset.¹⁴

¹³ *Hos fiskere i Tranquebar*, 1983, III p. 1; personal conversation with Fihl, 2015.

¹⁴ Fihl (1983), III p. 1-3

II. Dowry items from 1981

Fihl's collection of material objects include items that were part of a woman's dowry in marriage, for instance an unmarried daughter's dowry items, as well as other items that help illustrate dowry. In the section below, I have divided these items into four categories for the purpose of my analysis; wedding artifacts, jewelry, kitchen utilities and other dowry items, respectively. I shall try to illustrate how these categories reflect diverse aspects of the economic, social and cultural setting in which the system of dowry in Tranquebar functions.

Wedding artifacts

Two artifacts from Fihl's collection can be used to illustrate the culture and family setting of a marriage in Tranquebar, the first one being a decorated

clay pot with matching lid and the second one being a necklace, see number 1.1 and 1.2 in the catalog.¹⁵

The pot is usually given to the bride and groom at the wedding ceremony as a gift from the bride's parents. It is decorated with colored motives of fish, elephants or lotus flowers. This type of pot is normally used to store rice in the fishing household, and before the wedding, the parents will fill the pot with rice symbolizing fertility. A fishing household in 1981 would often own several pots similar to this wedding gift, however most of them are without decorations. Parents of the bride have to place an order for a decorated pot at a local pottery whereas pots without decorations can be bought at the local market.¹⁶

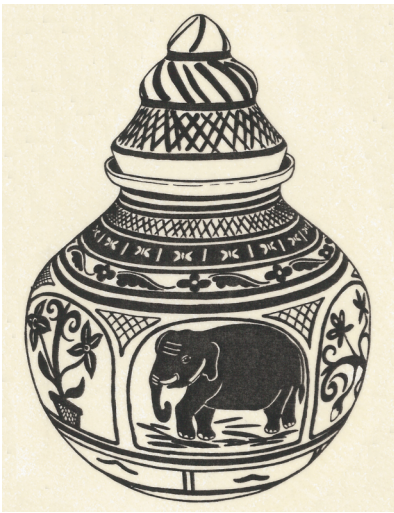


Fig. 2. A decorated clay pot with lid. The decorations depict flower motives and an elephant.

Drawing made also by Elsebet Morville, Moesgaard Tegnesteue, University of Aarhus, Denmark 1985. Published in Fihl, *Motiver fra Tranquebar*, 1986.

¹⁵ Pot with matching lid, Moesgaard Museum inventory EA 344 94-96, and necklace: EA 344 209-214.

¹⁶ Unpublished museum entries 1981, EA 344 94-96.



Fig. 3. Miss Renugadevi in her kitchen with several undecorated pots used for storage along the wall.

Photo by Esther Fihl 1981, Tranquebar.



Fig. 4. Renugadevi's elder sister mending the floor. Water containers made of brass are seen along the kitchen wall.

Photo by Esther Fihl 1981, Tranquebar.

A central part of the wedding ceremony is when the groom ties the yellow thread with a golden *thali* around the neck of his bride. The ornament is bought by the groom's family and symbolizes that she is now his wife and tied to him.¹⁷ The necklace can be seen as illustrating a different type of marriage payment, that being *bridewealth*. Whereas dowry, in the fishing village of Tranquebar in 1981, is a marriage payment from a bride's family to the groom, *bridewealth* can be defined as a marriage payment from the groom's family to the bride family.¹⁸ In this instance the bride will wear it as long as her husband is alive. If widowed she will have to take it off and return it to the groom family. Although the necklace is not part of a girl's dowry items and therefore not included in my definition of dowry, I have included it here to help illustrate the system of dowry in Tranquebar as well as the arrangement of alliances between families. In relatively well-off fishing families this necklace would occasionally consist of a gold string with the golden *thali* figure and also some gold beads and gold coins that were gifted by the bride's family after the wedding. However, in 1981 only few families were able to afford a gold necklace and would instead use a cotton string with costume jewelry such as beads, small figures and coins similar to the ones made of gold.¹⁹ This necklace symbolizes the bride's entrance into a new family and the husband she now belongs to. This is connected with a cultural tradition in south India, where the vast majority of Hindu families practices a patrilineal and patrilocal family system in which the bride moves in with her husband and his family after marriage.²⁰ Researchers such as T.N. Madan and Sahab Lal Srivastava argue that the relationship between a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law is of great significance, since they live in close proximity to each other and often under the same roof.²¹ Although they came to that conclusion by studying family and kinship in Kashmir and folk cultures in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh respectively, arguably the social structures of a

¹⁷ Fihl's field notes from 1981, however, also reveal a case where the father of the bride bought the *thali* and before the wedding he gave it to the groom who was the bride's maternal uncle.

¹⁸ Goody & Tambiah (1973) p. 2. In some instances the term *brideprice* is used instead of *bridewealth*. Some researchers such as Gray argue that marriage payments are similar to market transactions and that the term *price* is useful when discussion marriage payments, see Gray (1960). I do not discuss this in my article, however for more information see Dalton (1966), for more about this discussion.

¹⁹ Unpublished museum entry, EA 344 209-214.

²⁰ Sonawat (2001) p. 178.

²¹ Sonawat (2001) p. 183. See Madan (1966) or Srivastava (1974).

joint household can be found in Tranquebar as well.

In connection with the bride's upcoming life in a new joint family, the pot and the necklace can be seen as components of an arranged wedding celebrating the connection of two families rather than the connection of a bride and groom.²²

Fihl comments that this system of marriage contribute to the maintenance of an economic structure among fishing households in Tranquebar, where the relatively well-off households generally form alliances with each other, leaving the poor fishing households to form family alliances with equally poor households.²³ As a result, the relative wealth that some households experience can be kept within the bounds of alliances of family, especially through the dominating marriage system where for a girl her cross-cousin or her mother's brother is preferred in marriage.²⁴

Jewelry

Four artifacts from Fihl's collection can be used to illustrate the economy regarding dowry in Tranquebar; an arm ring, a pair of earrings, a nose ring, and a necklace, respectively, see number 2.2, 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5 in the catalog. In this collection, the arm ring is decorated with stylized flowers, the earring is decorated with stylized flowers and stars, the nose ring is decorated and set with three small stones and the necklace is decorated with stylized birds, fish, leaves and different pendants. All jewelry in the collection is made from imitation gold, and illustrates the jewelry in solid gold given to a girl before marriage.²⁵

According to Fihl's entries of the collection's material objects, relatively well-off families will typically start buying gold jewelry for their daughter's future dowry when she is at the age of twelve.²⁶ However, since the collection illustrates a relatively well-off fishing household, it is safe to assume that not

²² Fihl (1983), III p. 4.

²³ Fihl (1981a), p. 47.

²⁴ The cross-cousin marriage system relates to the kinship classification, practiced in south India. A cousin is preferred to marry a cross-cousin but not a parallel cousin. A cross-cousin is the child of a parent of the opposite sex of a your parent, for instance the child of a father's sister or the child of a mother's brother, and a parallel cousin is a cousin is the child of a parent of the same sex as a your parent, for instance the child of a mother's sister or of a father's brother. For more see: Andersen (2014) p. 77.

²⁵ Moesgaard Museum inventory. The arm ring: EA 344 200, the earring: EA 344 201, the nose ring: EA 344 202, the necklace: EA 344 203-208.

²⁶ Moesgaard Museum entry for, EA 344 200.



Fig. 5. Two girls carrying water containers and wearing various common jewelry (left) and women carrying water containers made of brass and wearing the yellow string with a *thali* as well as arm rings and nose rings (right).

Photos taken by Esther Fihl, 1981, Tranquebar.

every family would have been able to give their female children the same amount of dowry items that are included in the collection. This is consistent with a note in Fihl's unpublished entries of the collection's material objects, where she writes: "Girls from less wealthy households gets a pair of relatively cheap gold nose rings at the most (Indian Rupees ca. 400), when marriage plans arise."²⁷ Fihl argues that the household's social and economic position within the fishing community determines the amount of dowry a family is able to pay.²⁸ This is consistent with the different class variations within the fishing community. While some relatively poor fishing families only had the ability to acquire a dowry of around 200 Indian Rupees for their daughter, a very well-off fishing family would sometimes purchase jewelry worth up to

²⁷ Original note in Danish: "Piger fra mindre velstående hushold får højest et par relativt billige guldnäseringe (Approximately Rs. 400), når der foreligger gifteplaner." Unpublished museum entry, EA 344 200.

²⁸ Fihl (1981a), p. 47.



Fig. 6. Fish vendors at the beach. Some of them are wearing common jewelry, such as necklaces, arm rings and nose rings.

Photo by Esther Fihl 1981, Tranquebar.

20.000 Indian Rupees.²⁹ Consequently, when comparing the varied amount of dowry jewelry, the material differences between the poor fishing families and the few relatively well-off fishing families become clear.³⁰

The fact that relatively well-off households in 1981 will start buying gold jewelry years before the actual marriage of their daughters is an important point. A very low number of fishing families in Tranquebar would use bank accounts for the purposes of managing money.³¹ Therefore, dowry in a way also becomes a form of life savings and security in times of need, consequently replacing a savings bank account.³² The small dowry worth around

²⁹ Fihl (1983), III pp. 2-3. Originally the text said 50.000 Danish kroner, however, Fihl later checked her field notes and corrected it, since it was supposed to say 20.000 Indian Rupees. See, museum entry for EA 344 200 and EA 344 202. The prices and dowry values used in this article reflects 1981 prices and are not adjusted for inflation in the period between 1981 and publication of this article.

³⁰ Fihl (1981b) p. 356.

³¹ Fihl (2014) p. 136.

³² Fihl (1983), III p. 3.

200 Indian Rupees, and the relatively big dowry worth around 20.000 Indian Rupees, as well as all the variations in between, illustrates the different economic circumstances within the fishing village, as dowry jewelry was the bulk of a dowry's financial value.³³ Arguably, many families strive to present a good dowry, as this determines how well their daughter will marry. This corresponds with interviews, conducted by Fihl in Tranquebar during her research in 1981, where the grooms' families placed high importance on dowry when choosing a bride. Subsequently, Fihl wrote:

When asked, which considerations were important when choosing a spouse, and afterwards asked to prioritize these considerations, all fishermen-respondents in Tranquebar declared that a girl's caste affiliation was of highest importance. Of second highest importance was the amount of a girl's dowry. The following order was subsequently given for age, prettiness and education. Even highly educated, newly married fishermen living in Tranquebar, responded in precise agreement with the aforementioned prioritization.³⁴

This means that even though considerations such as age, appearance and educational level come into play when arranging a marriage, caste and dowry function as significant determining factors. The different jewelry items found in Fihl's collection represent, as mentioned above, a relatively well-off fishing family. However, relative wealth seems to fluctuate in Tranquebar, as a relatively well-off household typically invests in fishing tools, which are a short-term investment that roughly last around 10 years. Factors such as a disproportionate number of girls or boys can also have a big impact on the financial situation in a household.³⁵ I argue that social mobility, both upward-mobility and downward-mobility, is high in Tranquebar, among other things

³³ Fihl (1981a), p. 45.

³⁴ Fihl (1981a), p. 46. I have translated this quote into English from Danish. This is the original quote: "Adspurgt om hvilke overvejelser, der spillede ind ved udvælgelsen af en ægtefælle, og dernæst bedt om at prioritere disse fænomener indbyrdes svarede samtlige adspurgte, mandlige fiskere i Tranquebar, at pigens kastetilhørsforhold var det vigtigste. Næstvigtigst var størrelsen af pigens medgift. Følgende rækkefølge blev dernæst givet for fænomener som alder, køn og uddannelse. Selv højuddannede, nygifte, mandlige fiskere bosat i Tranquebar svarede i nøje overensstemmelse med ovennævnte prioritering."

³⁵ Fihl (2014) p. 139.

because of the system of dowry.³⁶ Families with a high number of daughters, known as girl-families, have more dowry expenses than families with a high number of sons, known as boy-families.³⁷

Normally boys improve the household economy because they participate in fishing and consequently bring home an income, while girls worsen the household economy because of dowry expenses.³⁸ To put this into perspective, for example imagine two relatively well-off fishing households that both would be able to save up enough money for a jewelry dowry of 20.000 Indian Rupees. Both households had five children each, however one had four boys and one girl while the other had five girls. The first household would be able to give the daughter a dowry of 20.000 Indian Rupees, thus increasing the possibility of a relatively good marriage, while the second household would have to divide 20.000 Indian Rupees among 5 girls, enabling them to give each girl



Fig. 7. A necklace.

Drawing by Elsebet Morville, Moesgaard Tegnesteue, University of Aarhus, Denmark 1985. Also published in Fihl, *Motiver fra Tranquebar*, 1986.

a dowry of 4.000 Indian Rupees in principle, but decreasing their possibility of a relatively good marriage unless they will be able to plan for the customary mother's brother or a cross-cousin marriage in which case the dowry might be lower as the marriage takes place within an already functioning family alliance. As a consequence of this dowry-system, a daughter's upwards mobility is more likely if she has a low number of sisters and her downwards mobility is more likely if she has a high number of sisters. Contributing to

³⁶ Social mobility is henceforth referred to simply as mobility in this article. Upward mobility is defined as mobility where a person achieves a higher social or economic position, while downward-mobility is defined as mobility where a person achieve a lower social or economic position. The definitions are inspired by Encyclopædia Britannica's definition of the term *social mobility*.

³⁷ DR2 Temaaften, Tranquebar, National Danish Television.

³⁸ Fihl (2014) p. 139.

the varied landscape of high mobility levels in Tranquebar is the fact mentioned by Fihl in her field report from 1981 where she describes how men are often able to marry into a wealthier family than they were born into, if they are well educated.³⁹

Kitchen utilities

Besides jewelry, the most common form of dowry in 1981 was kitchen utilities and relatively well-off families would spend up to 2.000 Indian Rupees purchasing these.⁴⁰ Fihl's collection includes many kitchen items that could have been used as part of a girl's dowry, for instance a water container, various baskets, an *idly* pot, floor knife and a fan.⁴¹ See catalog numbers 3.1-3.6.

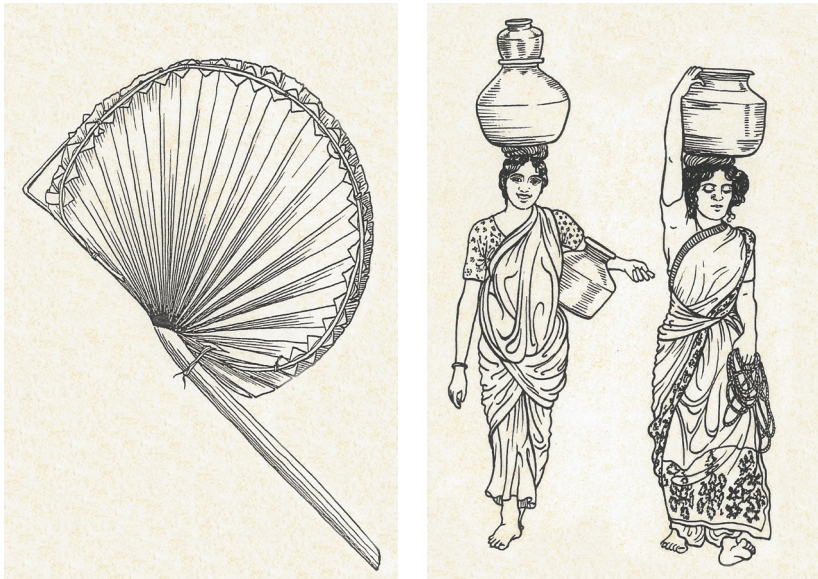


Fig. 8. The drawing on the left illustrates a fan made from a palm three leave and the drawing on the right illustrates two women carrying water containers made of brass.

Drawing by Elsebet Morville, Moesgaard Tegnesteue, University of Aarhus, Denmark 1985. Also published in Fihl, *Motiver fra Tranquebar*, 1986.

³⁹ Fihl, (1981a), p. 47.

⁴⁰ Fihl, (1981a), p. 45.

⁴¹ Moesgaard Museum entry for EA 344 105-113, a water container, EA 344 67-69 for a goblet, EA 344 73-75 or EA 344 86-87 for a cooking kettle, EA 344 88-90 for a floor knife, EA 344 61-65 for a fan, or for instance EA 344 121-128 and EA 344 132-138 for various examples of baskets.

Particularly, it seems that the water container made of brass was a common dowry item in 1981, and it provides a good example of dowry when it comes to kitchen utilities. Along with the much cheaper clay water container, the brass water container is used by females in the household for fetching and storing water. Like jewelry, a brass water container can be used as a pawn item for pawnbrokers in Tranquebar, making it a relatively safe investment as well as a type of exchangeable savings.⁴² In 1981 the division of labor in a typical fishing household in Tranquebar was based on gender, with men and boys normally doing fishery and repairing fishing nets, and women and girls doing household chores and sometimes fish trading. This division of labor is reflected in the dowry items, as kitchen utilities are part of a woman's work sphere in Tranquebar.⁴³



Fig. 9. Fish drying on the beach in Tranquebar with various baskets used for fish handling lying around.

Photo by Esther Fihl 1981, Tranquebar.

⁴² Museum entry for EA 344 105-113.

⁴³ Fihl (1983), III p. 3.

Other dowry items

However, besides kitchen utilities and jewelry being the most common dowry items, other artifacts from Fihl's collection could have functioned as dowry items, too. For instance clothing such as a sari made of colorful cotton fabric with imitation gold threads. Although the saris included in Fihl's collection are of a relatively cheap kind, they can also be produced very expensively with fine materials and gold threads.⁴⁴



Fig. 10. Women dressed in typical cheap saris while preparing and drying fish.
Photo by Esther Fihl 1981, Tranquebar.

So far in this article I have looked at dowry items that would most likely have been part of a girl's dowry agreement. However very often the groom and his family will expect the bride's family to bring additional objects after the wedding as well.⁴⁵ For instance, they might expect the bride's family to provide clothing, such as saris, for their daughter or they might ask them directly or indirectly to replace broken kitchen utilities.⁴⁶ While additional marriage payments are not included in my definition of dowry, it does offer

⁴⁴ Moesgaard Museum entry EA 344 147-152 and EA 344 153-155.

⁴⁵ Bloch & Rao (2002) p. 1029.

⁴⁶ Fihl (2014) p. 139.

an interesting perspective on dowries impact on married life. The *bequest theory of dowry* implies that dowry exists for the good of the bride, however some researchers have strongly argued against this. For instance Luciana Suran et al., argues that more married women in rural Bangladesh report domestic violence if their families had presented dowry, compared to women whose families did not. Moreover, women with small dowries reported greater levels of abuse than women with big dowries.⁴⁷ Similarly, Francis Bloch and Vijayendra Rao argue that domestic violence in rural south India can be used as a bargaining device to demand additional payments after a wedding, meaning that additional dowry is paid from the bride's parents to prevent their daughter's abuse.⁴⁸ Therefore, it would seem that dowry can determine the bride's role in her new family and how well she will be treated.

As a concluding remark, even though Fihl's collection illustrates the material objects that were typically part of a girl's dowry in 1981, dowry negotiations were always individually settled between the bride's family and the groom's family before the wedding.⁴⁹ Thus, some dowry agreements might include individual items not included in Fihl's collection. Furthermore, in this analysis of dowry items I have deliberately omitted analyzing cash and its role in a girl's dowry, as stated in the methodology section.

III. Dowry in the post-tsunami era of 2007

Summing up, Fihl's collection of items illustrates a relatively well-off fishing household in 1981, including material objects that reflect a typical dowry, such as a decorated wedding pot, jewelry and kitchen utilities as well as other objects that reflect the different shades of the dowry system in Tranquebar, like the *thali* (wedding necklace). These dowry items illustrate aspects of cultural significances, family values, kinship, economy and society in Tranquebar. It mirrors a bride's role, well-being and voice in her new family, the dowry as a savings system and the class variations within the fishing community in Tranquebar. This opens up for a comparison between the system of dowry in 1981 and the system of dowry 26 years later in 2007, where Fihl assisted by her son Asger Fihl Simonsen collected a series of life-story

⁴⁷ Suran, Luciana et al. (2004).

⁴⁸ Bloch & Rao (2002) pp. 1029-1043.

⁴⁹ Fihl (2014) p. 135.

interviews among the fishing population of Tranquebar.⁵⁰ In this discussion section of my article these life-stories give a new perspective on the dowry system in Tranquebar as well as of the development of dowry in the fishing village in the post-tsunami period. Most of the life-stories were collected in January and February of 2007 and later on, a Tamil-speaking interpreter transcribed 33 of them. Although dowry is not the main focal point in the collection of life-stories, many of them mention dowry and the development of the dowry system in Tranquebar.⁵¹

On 26 December 2004, the Indian Ocean Tsunami struck the coast of Tranquebar, leaving behind several hundred casualties, destroyed fishing equipment and livelihoods, and causing the need for temporary shelter for around 5,000 people in the fishing village of Tranquebar.⁵² Following the tsunami, Tranquebar entered a reconstruction period influenced by state support and NGO awareness, in which the population of the fishing village had to adapt their pre-tsunami culture and norms to the new situation they found themselves in overnight. Furthermore, many people in the fishing village received financial support, and suddenly found themselves with more money than they previously had.⁵³

While I have chosen interviews that represent what seem to be the general tendencies in the post-tsunami era of Tranquebar, there are always exceptions and a few interviews that differ from the norm. For instance, one middle-aged interviewee mentioned that her experience with additional dowry after the wedding was unusual since her parents were not able to pay for anything and in their stead her newly wedded husband had bought some items

⁵⁰ The life-stories are unpublished. However, Fihl granted me access to the material. All life-story interviews used in this article were collected in Tranquebar during January and February of 2007. They were collected with the goal of gaining knowledge about life stories and changes in the society in the post-tsunami period. Several interviewees are the same as in 1981 or they belong to the same generation or younger generations of the very same families which had been part of Fihl's investigation in 1981. Tamil is the spoken language in Tranquebar, and the interviews were later transcribed into English by a translator, meaning some points might be lost because of the language barrier.

⁵¹ Fihl (2014) p. 131.

⁵² Hastrup, Frida (2009): *Weathering the World. Recovery in the Wake of the Tsunami in a Tamil Fishing Village*. Ph.d. Thesis. University of Copenhagen. Supervisor: Professor Esther Fihl.

⁵³ Fihl (2014) pp. 134 + 140-143.



Fig. 11. A family in front of temporary barracks that was built following the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004.

Photo by Esther Fihl 2007, Tranquebar.

and told his parents that they were gifts from the in-laws.⁵⁴ Additionally, my discussion is based on qualitative material, and while it gives a good in-depth understanding of the subject of dowry, for future research it would be interesting to look at dowry in Tranquebar through quantitative research as well.

When looking at the life-story interview collection from 2007 a common denominator regarding dowry for the vast majority of interviews is that the amount of dowry has increased in Tranquebar. One mother of a young daughter ready for marriage said:

At the time of my own marriage there was no dowry. Instead, my husband provided me with some jewels during our marriage. But now it is not like that. They [members of the groom families] are asking the bride's family what the parents can do for their daughter.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ For life-stories that differ from the norm, see: Interview, January 2007, conducted by Esther Fihl and transcribed by Ilakkuvan. Interview, 18th January 2007, conducted by Esther Fihl and transcribed by Ilakkuvan. Interview, 3rd February 2007, conducted by Asger Fihl Simonsen and transcribed by J. Shunmugaraja.

⁵⁵ Interview, 29th January 2007, conducted by Asger Fihl Simonsen and transcribed by J. Shunmugaraja.

Since the majority of interviewees are middle-aged, females and males alike often compare their own marriage or their sister's marriage, respectively, with that of their own daughter or other girls from her generation. Many agree that the number of families, openly asking for a bigger dowry and requesting expensive dowry items, has risen.⁵⁶

Similarly Rao, an economist who has conducted research on dowries in India, claims that the real value of dowries increased in South Asia during the 40 years leading up to 1993 where he published *Dowry 'inflation' in Rural India: A Statistical Investigation*. In his statistical study of dowry based on data collected among households in six villages in the central inland of south India as well as data from the decennial Indian census, he uses the term *dowry inflation* and argues that the inflation can be explained by the *marriage squeeze theory*. This theory claims that population growth in India results in a higher number of younger people entering the marriage market. In this marriage market women often marry men slightly older than themselves, and thus women tend to belong to a generation with a higher number of people. As a result of this a surplus of marriageable women, compared to marriageable men, is created.⁵⁷ However, while Anderson agrees that south Indian society is experiencing a period of dowry inflation she disagrees with explaining dowry inflation by population changes. She argues that population growth causes an adjustment in age between marriageable women and marriageable men, thus decreasing the surplus of women in the marriage market. For instance, women can choose to postpone marriage or grooms can choose to marry younger.⁵⁸

My empirical sources make it impossible to conclude whether or not the value of dowries in Tranquebar has increased. However, the life-story interviews clearly shows that the residents of Tranquebar feel as if dowries have increased, a feeling that is consistent with both Rao and Anderson's belief in dowry inflation. Yet, the fishers themselves do not point to any structural changes as possible explanations for the development. Instead the majority of fishers, who discuss dowry inflation, seem to believe that it is a result of increased greediness among some fishing families. However, it seems un-

⁵⁶ For instance: Interview, 7th February 2007, conducted by Esther Fihl and transcribed by J. Shunmugaraja; interview 7th January 2007, conducted by Esther Fihl and transcribed by J. Shunmugaraja.

⁵⁷ Rao, *Dowry 'inflation' in Rural India: A statistical Investigation*, pp. 283-293.

⁵⁸ Anderson (2007b) pp. 140-147.

likely that families with male sons, suddenly decided to change their ways without a triggering factor.

However, while the material itself does not explain the reason behind dowry inflation, it does offer an insight into the kind of changes seen in Tranquebar. One of the male interviewees offers a good example of the development:

For my sisters' marriages, we did not give anything as dowry. Instead their husbands had provided for marrying my sisters. Now for girls' marriages we are giving minimum ten sovereign of gold and spending one lakh rupees for purchasing vessels, but we are not giving any cash into the hands of the groom family. During the time when the males provided bridewealth, the poor family would as dowry provide an earring and a nose ring alone, but rich persons would give a gold chain. Now the bridegrooms will demand motor bikes from the brides's family as a dowry, but they will not ask them boat or catamaran as a dowry. The groom wishes to rove the village on the bike with his wife for a three-month period for jolly. They are thinking it as a prestige issue to receive dowry and if any of the bridegrooms received five sovereign as a dowry, another bridegroom wish to have ten sovereign as dowry from the bride's family. So there is kept a competitive sense among the bridegrooms by asking this increased dowry by which they wish to prove their prestige to the society.⁵⁹

This quote is interesting in two ways. Firstly, while the bulk of a female's dowry consisted of jewelry in 1981, the interviewee mentioned modern forms of dowry items, for instance motorcycles. This is a notion that is shared in other of the life-stories from 2007, where modern dowry items such as televisions, washing machines and so on, are mentioned. Arguably dowry items have adapted with time and societal progress in Tranquebar.⁶⁰ Secondly, he connects social status directly with dowry, and argues that a big dowry is viewed as prestigious. This is consistent with one of Fihl's arguments in her article "The 'Second Tsunami': Disputed Moralities of Economic Transactions among fishers" from 2014 where she writes that status has traditionally been associated with the ability to give large gifts and host large

⁵⁹ Life-story 7th January 2007, conducted by Esther Fihl and transcribed by J. Shunmugaraja.

⁶⁰ For instance: Life-story 7th January 2007, conducted by Esther Fihl and transcribed by J. Shunmugaraja; Life-story 7th February 2007, conducted by Esther Fihl and transcribed by J. Shunmugaraja.

celebrations.⁶¹ I find that this can be interpreted in agreement with the theory of *Sanskritisation*, a term used by social anthropologists to explain why lower-castes adapt upper-caste forms of behavior; to achieve higher social status.⁶² In this case, *Sanskritisation* means that since the upper-castes are able to pay a higher dowry, the fishing families are interested in adapting that pattern because it heightens their status.⁶³ Furthermore, the importance of social status can be compared with my earlier point that the social and economic position of a household determines the amount of dowry they are able to pay.

To summarize, the interviewees in 2007 from Tranquebar agree that dowry have risen and that some dowry items have changed since 1981. However, according to several of the collected life-stories it is not quite clear when this shift took place and whether or not it was a gradual change or a rapid change. While it would be easy to assume that the new bigger dowries



Fig. 12. Preparing a wedding ceremony with decorated pots in the foreground.
Photo by Esther Fihl 2007, Tranquebar.

⁶¹ Fihl (2014) p. 143.

⁶² Dalmia & Lawrence (2009) p. 120; Srinivas (1984).

⁶³ For more information, see for instance; Anderson (1999), Billig (1992), Caldwell (1983) or Upadhya (1990).

was a result of the tsunami's effect on Tranquebar, Rao argues that a gradual change was happening long before 2004 as we have seen above. This is consistent with one of the life-stories collected by Fihl where a middle-aged woman explained:

From the last five years, they are asking very openly about their demands for dowry from the bride family. The bridegroom's family is now demanding company products as dowry (...) If they need TV they are declaring: we need the Onida company TV and Butterfly mixi. They are influenced by the television advertisement in relation to which they are demanding the company products as dowry from the bride's family. They are thinking this as a prestige or commanding respects from others.⁶⁴

She argues that the change was already happening before the tsunami hit the coast of Tranquebar.⁶⁵ However, there seems to be evidence of a rapid change in dowry too. As already mentioned above, many families received financial



Fig. 13. A groom ties the cord with the thali around the bride's neck during their wedding.

Photo by Esther Fihl 2007, Tranquebar.

⁶⁴ Life-story interview 7th January 2007, conducted by Esther Fihl, transcribed by Shunmugaraja.

⁶⁵ The life-story was conducted in 2007, that is three years after the tsunami, and she mentions that families have been asking for dowry rather openly for five years, that must be from 2002.

support, such as compensation for dead family members, and they were thus able to pay a bigger dowry for their daughter. Fihl commented on this in “The ‘Second Tsunami’” where she wrote:

Unknown families from neighboring fishing villages turned up on the scene in Tharangampadi where, in the streets, they bluntly asked for families who had marriageable girls and who had been paid such compensation.⁶⁶

Arguably, dowries gradually grew bigger and some people started to talk about it more publicly after the tsunami in 2004. However, it seems this gradual change evolved into a rapid change because of the influx of money after the tsunami, and dowries grew bigger accordingly. The empirical evidence therefor shows signs of both a gradual and a rapid change in dowry in the fishing community of Tranquebar.

Even though the majority of interviewees agree that dowries have changed since 1981, they also mention four aspects of the dowry system that corresponds with the system of dowry in 1981. Firstly, the importance of children’s gender in a family, as underlined by one interviewee who related:

Even after getting many female children, I and my husband were very happy because of their birth. They are my children and only when I tried to marry them now, it has become the most difficult time of my life. (...) Ever since they reached fifteen or twenty years of age, we have tried to arrange for their marriage and spent money on their education. We suffered a lot, because they are female children. We have to arrange their marriage and we have to give dowry for them because they [the groom families] are asking dowry for marrying them. We are arranging their marriage with the amount of what we have in our hand, and despite this they [the potential groom families] are disgracing the parents of the girl saying: ‘as when you can provide this (or that) amount or gold for your daughter, only then I would allow your daughter into my house for her life’. - It is an insult to the girl’s parents.⁶⁷

The interviewee mentions the challenges a girl-family faces when it comes to dowry, since these families have more daughters to gather dowry for.

⁶⁶ Fihl (2014) p. 134.

⁶⁷ Life-story interview 7th February 2007, conducted by Esther Fihl and transcribed by J. Shunmugaraja.

Similarly, to the analysis from above, which argued for high levels of upwards and downwards mobility in Tranquebar; the number of female children seems to affect a family's economic standing in 2007. In the fisher community there is a strong tradition for women being the economic head of household and one female interviewee with many female daughters, said:

My mother-in-law had provided me with a share from her property and she had constructed a house for me. In her lifetime she worked and earned like a man by which income she kept my family in a good position. Not only did I get four female children, also every one of my husband's brothers got four female children. - We are now poor, because I got four female children. Because of my female children, I am living a poor life. For marrying our daughter we have to spend plenty of rupees. Please, you imagine if I did not have any female children and I did not spend anything for their marriage, the money that we have spent all would now be a property to my family and we would be rich persons in our life.⁶⁸

The interviewee considers her and her family's downward mobility a result of the system of dowry. She mentions how her family had a good position and a house before they had four dowries to save up for.

Secondly, besides the challenges of a girl-family, other aspects of the development in Tranquebar support the argument of high levels of mobility in the years following the tsunami. One interviewee said:

Because of the tsunami, our "rhinoceros" [rich and influential] family became a poor one in Tharangambadi, and other peoples of this village became rich ones (...) The people who worked as laborers under our family, now they are in good position. After the tsunami they received boats and nets and other relief goods after which they have gained a good position in life.⁶⁹

Her experience is connected with the coordination in which tsunami relief was divided between the residents of Tranquebar. When NGO's and state officials arrived in Tranquebar they negotiated and cooperated with the fishers' caste council, a council of fishermen that usually determine circumstances of

⁶⁸ Interview 7th February 2007, conducted by Esther Fihl and transcribed by J. Shunmugaraja.

⁶⁹ Interview 7th February 2007, conducted by Esther Fihl and transcribed by J. Shunmugaraja.

economic, political and ritual nature in the community.⁷⁰ The fishers' caste council was responsible for dividing a good part of the tsunami relief in the fishing community, and they did so in the beginning by using a traditional egalitarian gendered principle, where relief was divided equally among every male in the fishing community. Not only was the financial relief, where each grown-up male received around 15.000 Indian Rupees, enough to a share in a boat, based on this principle but the distribution of additional aid such as food or fishing equipment was also based on this principle. It was an object of protest, however, since this left widows and families with only few grown-up males members at a disadvantage, since they did not qualify for as much relief even though they might account for just as many people in sheer numbers in the household.⁷¹ Anyhow, the relief system with given shares in a boat affected the mobility in Tranquebar and arguably families with a high number of men were more likely to experience upwards mobility than families with a low number.

Thirdly, the importance of education can be seen in both 1981 and 2007. In 2007 a newly married woman said:

My parents did not wish to keep me in further studies, because my higher education might become a hindrance to my marriage. From our fishermen community we cannot expect any educated bridegroom and it is a dearth (rare) one. In my family, my parents have four daughters and I do not wish to be a barrier to my sisters' marriage. (...) I am an educated bride, so my in-laws demanded nothing from me as a dowry.⁷²

The quote shows the importance of education when marrying in Tranquebar. The interviewee is limited in her marriage options if she is relatively well educated, since it might not be possible to find a groom equally well educated. Moreover, she is able to marry without a dowry because of her education. Thus, it would seem education can compensate for a lack of dowry in some cases. This resembles a man being able to marry a daughter from a relatively well-off family if he is well educated, thus undergoing upward mobility. However, only one interviewee mentioned a correlation between education

⁷⁰ Fihl (2014) pp. 140-141. For more about the fishers' caste council see Fihl (1981a), pp. 47-52; Fihl (2013), pp.41-65.

⁷¹ Fihl (2014) pp. 140-142.

⁷² Life-story interview 3rd February 2007, conducted by Asger Fihl Simonsen and transcribed by J. Shunmugaraja.

and dowry, thus it cannot be viewed as a significant indicator of the relationship between the two.⁷³

Fourth, class variations within the fishing community seem to exist in both 1981 and 2007. Examples of class variations in 2007 have already been mentioned by a number of the interviewees, and in the quotes above where we also learn about downward and upward mobility when it comes to households' dependence on children's gender and the way tsunami relief was distributed.

To sum up, the empirical knowledge gained from the collection of interviews from 2007, shows that dowries have changed since 1981. The interviewees express an experience of dowry inflation, a feeling much similar to other studies from across South Asia in the same period. Moreover, dowry items have changed and newer modern items such as motorcycles and televisions have been included. The discussion show that dowry changed gradually until the tsunami of 2004 where it suddenly changed rapidly in Tranquebar. While the question of why the gradual change in dowry happened remains unclear, it is clear that the rapid change happened as a result of the money influx after the tsunami. However, the discussion also show similarities between the system of dowry in 1981 and 2007, that being; the difficulties girl-families face, high levels of mobility in Tranquebar, as well as class variations within the fishing community in both 1981 and 2007. It would seem that the underlying economic, social and cultural factors that permit the existence and continuation of dowries, remain the same, because the girl-families, mobility and class variations all remain part of the underlying structural system. Thus conclusively, I shall argue that this depicts a change in dowry but not a change in the system of dowry.

Conclusion

In the sections above, I have tried to account for how the system of dowry occurred in the fishing community in 1981, and I have argued that it was tied to underlying economic and social structures in the fishing village of Tranquebar in more ways than one. First, the system of dowry was tied to a society with a patrilineal and patrilocal family system where the bride

⁷³ For more about the relationship between dowry and education in general, see Munshi (2012), where she argues that dowry increases if a groom is well educated, but not if a women is well educated.

moves in with her in-laws after marriage, prompting the importance of a good relationship. Second, the system of dowry was tied to a society where marriage was viewed as a connection between two families, thus as a tool of maintaining or forming alliances. Third, the system of dowry was tied to a society with class variations where the social and economic position of a household determines the amount of dowry they are able to pay. Fourth, the system of dowry was tied to a society where dowry has replaced a regular savings account in the bank, for instance both dowry jewelry and water containers made of brass can be used as pawn items with pawnbrokers. Fifth, the system of dowry was tied to a society where caste and dowry were viewed as the main determining factors when marrying. Sixth, the system of dowry was tied to a society with high levels of upward-mobility and downward-mobility. Finally, I have tried to demonstrate that in some cases the system of dowry was tied to additional marriage payment that can determine how well the bride will be treated in her new family.

When I compared the system of dowry in 1981 with the system of dowry in 2007, I found some of the same underlying economic and social factors in both cases. This included high levels of social mobility, challenges in a girl-family and class variations within the fishing community. I also saw how some of the interviewees underlined the connection between education and dowry in 2007. Moreover, while I concluded that the social and economic position of a household in 1981 determined the amount of dowry they were able to pay, I also found a connection between social status and dowry in the life-story interview material from 2007, where the ability to give a big dowry was viewed as prestigious, thus emphasizing the importance of social status. I found support for a change in dowry in Tranquebar, for instance most interviewees felt that dowries had increased and that dowry items had changed. I argue that dowry items have adapted with time and progress in Tranquebar, introducing items such as motorcycles, televisions and so on. I conclude that dowry, as a form of direct marriage payment where items or jewelry are given to a bride's family-in-law by her parents upon marriage has changed between 1981 and 2007, but that the system of dowry in 1981 and in 2007 share several structural consistencies.

The last goal of my article was to discuss the pace of dowry inflation as well as social mobility in Tranquebar. I concluded that, dowry inflation happened gradually before the tsunami, however as a result of the money influx

in the reconstruction period after the tsunami, a rapid change in dowry occurred in Tranquebar in the years following 2004. Moreover, Tranquebar experienced high levels of social mobility in 1981 as a result of common short-term investments such as fishing equipment as well as the financial struggles related to being a girl-family. As a consequence of this, a daughter's upwards mobility was more likely in 1981 if she had a low number of sisters and her downwards mobility was more likely if she had a high number of sisters. Similarly, Tranquebar experienced high levels of social mobility in 2007 as a consequence of the financial support the village received after the tsunami as well as the financial struggles experienced by girl-families. I conclude that families with a relatively high number of male members were more likely to experience upwards mobility after the tsunami than families with a relatively high number of females, as a result of the egalitarian gendered principle by which tsunami relief was divided.

CATALOG

***A selection of items from Fihl's collection in the
fishing community of Tranquebar in 1981***

Introduction

This catalog is organized by the same categorizes as used in the analysis above, that being; wedding artifacts, jewelry, kitchen utilities and other dowry items. Fihl's collection of material objects from 1981 included around 230 artifacts representing the daily work processes and livelihood in fishing households in Tranquebar/Tharangampadi.

Items comprised in this catalog include common dowry items, items that might have functioned as dowry in some families as well as items that help explain the system of dowry. In 1981 the bulk of a dowry consisted of jewelry, usually made of gold and sometimes worth around 50.000 Indian Rupees.⁷⁴ However, only very few families in the fishing community of Tranquebar could afford such a big dowry in 1981, and girls from poor households sometimes only received a couple of cheap nose rings of imitation gold. As a result of budget limitations during the collecting in 1981, the majority of the jewelry items collected are made of imitation gold or aluminum instead of gold and silver, respectively. However, in form and design they look like the pieces of gold jewelry. The local name, mentioned below refers to the local Tamil term used by the fishing caste of Meenavar Pattanavar in 1981.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Not adjusted for inflation in the period between 1981 and publication of this article.

⁷⁵ My main source in this catalog has been the museum entries handwritten by Fihl in 1981 for the Moesgaard Museum in Aarhus, Denmark. In 2016, I digitalized and edited these entries in close cooperation with Fihl. Some of these museum items, along with some items from Fihl's private collection has been handed over to The National Museum of Denmark, in Copenhagen. In this catalog, the Moesgaard Museum's number is listed since the items have not yet been furnished with a new number at the National Museum.

1. Wedding artifacts



1.1. Decorated pot with lid

A pot made of clay and used for storing rice and chilies as well as other food products. Similar pots without decorations can be found in almost every fishing household in 1981. Decorated pots are a typical wedding present from parents of the bride. These pots are decorated with colored motives of e.g. fish, elephants and lotus flowers. Pots without decorations can be bought at the local market and decorated pots can be ordered from a local pottery.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Pot: Diameter: 40 cm, height: 36 cm

Lid: Diameter: 17 cm, height: 17 cm

Materials: Clay

Local name: *Sal*

Fihl's private collection and similar to Moesgaard Museum, inventory number: EA 344 94-96

Photograph: John Simonsen, 2016.



1.2. Marriage necklace

A marriage necklace (*thali*) with small figures, pearls and coins made of imitation gold on a cotton string. This necklace is not used as dowry in Tranquebar but instead the groom's family presents it to the bride. At the wedding ceremony, the groom ties the necklace around his bride's neck. The pendants of the necklace are similar to ones in real gold which will be bought if the families to be united through marriage are relatively well-off. If the bride's parents can afford it, she usually receives the gold coins a couple of months after her wedding, to place on the necklace. The necklace is normally worn hidden underneath the sari and not on the outside. During a wedding between poor fishing families an inexpensive version of this necklace is used.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Length: 82 cm

Materials: Imitation gold, cotton string

Local name: *Thali* and *kayir*

Fihl's private collection and similar to Moesgaard Museum, inventory number: EA 344 209-211

Photograph: John Simonsen, 2016.

2. Jewelry



2.1. Toe ring

Toe rings made from winded aluminum threads. Parents' of the bride often give their daughter 2 to 6 similar toe rings in pure silver following the wedding. Therefore, the toe ring is sometimes an additional marriage payment rather than a direct marriage payment. Married women usually wear it on the index toe of both feet.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Diameter: 2 cm

Materials: Aluminum

Local name: *Miti*

Fihl's private collection and similar to Moesgaard Museum, inventory number: EA 344 195

Photograph: John Simonsen, 2016.



2.2. Arm ring

Arm arms ring made from imitation gold similar to the one(s) of pure gold given by relatively well-off parents as dowry to follow their daughter into marriage.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Diameter: 6,5 cm

Materials: Imitation gold

Fihl's private collection and similar to Moesgaard Museum, inventory number: EA 344 200

Photograph: John Simonsen, 2016.



2.3. Earrings

A pair of earrings made from imitation gold. The earrings are similar to the earrings made of pure gold and given by relatively well-off parents to their daughter before marriage and used as dowry.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Diameter: 2 cm

Materials: Imitation gold

Local name: *Thodu*

Fihl's private collection and similar to Moesgaard Museum, inventory number: EA 344 201

Photograph: John Simonsen, 2016.



2.4. Nose rings

A pair of nose rings with three small stones each. These nose rings of imitation gold are rather similar to nose rings of pure gold worn by girls from relatively well-off fishing households. In Tranquebar it is common to have a hole in each nostril and nose rings are typically worn in pairs. A nose ring is usually the first piece of jewelry a girl receives around the age of 12 and for females from poor fishing families often the only piece of jewelry that a girl receives. The price of gold nose rings varies with size, but in 1981 they would typically sell for around 200-400 Indian Rupees.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Diameter: 1 cm.

Materials: Imitation gold

Local name: *Mukkuthi*

Fihl's private collection and similar to Moesgaard Museum, inventory number: EA 344 202

Photograph: John Simonsen, 2016.



2.5. Necklace

Necklace made of plates of metal covered in imitation gold and decorated with stylized motives of birds and fishes. The necklace is similar to necklaces of pure gold, worn by women from relatively well-off fishing households.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Width (main motive): 5,5 cm, length: 39 cm

Materials: Imitation gold

Fihl's private collection and similar to Moesgaard Museum, inventory number: EA 344 203-205

Photograph: John Simonsen, 2016.



2.6. Ankle bracelet

An ankle bracelet with charms similar to ankle bracelets of pure silver, which is worn by girls from relatively well-off fishing households as well as girls from other castes in Tranquebar. The charms take the forms of small bells and can be added to the bracelet throughout a girl's adolescence.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Width: 3 cm, length: 23 cm

Materials: Aluminum

Fihl's private collection and similar to Moesgaard Museum, inventory number: EA 344 193-194

Photograph: John Simonsen, 2016.

3. Kitchen utilities



3.1. Brass water container

A water container of brass used when collecting or storing water in Tranquebar. When collecting water in 1981, a woman would typically carry one water container on her hip and another on her head, as well as a smaller water container on top of the one on her head, please see Fig. 5. Water containers made of brass are sold by local Christian traders or travelling members of the Nadar caste. Water containers are sold according to their weight, this one costs around 110 Indian Rupees.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Diameter: 36 cm, height: 32 cm

Materials: Brass

Local name: *Kudam*

Fihl's private collection and similar to Moesgaard Museum, inventory number: EA 344 105-113

Photograph: John Simonsen, 2016.



3.2. Seagrass basket

A basket coiled from seagrass. When empty, it folds easily. It is used for multiple purposes. Firstly, when transporting rice. Secondly, folded up as support on the head when carrying a basket. Thirdly, for protection against the sun. Fourthly, folded and placed as a lid on top of a basket with fish, for instance to protect the fish from the sun. Fifthly, for transporting fish to the local market. The seagrass basket is produced by members of the Harijans caste [a term widely used in 1981 to describe certain low-caste groups] and then bought and resold by women in the fishing community.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Diameter: 44 cm, height: 35 cm

Materials: Seagrass

Local name: *Potti*

Fihl's private collection and similar to Moesgaard Museum, inventory number: EA 344 121-126

Photograph: John Simonsen, 2016.



3.3. Bamboo basket

A basket coiled from split bamboo and used during trading as well as when carrying the daily catch.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Diameter: 43 cm, height: 32 cm

Materials: Bamboo

Local name: *Kootai*

Moesgaard Museum, number: EA 344 135-137



3.4. Idly pot

A cooking pot used for making *idly*, a type of steamed rice cakes typically served with a spicy *sambhar* sauce at breakfast. Several widows from the fishing community in Tranquebar made a living by selling *idly* on the street in 1981.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Diameter: 24 cm, height: 25 cm

Materials: Sheet metal, cotton

Local name: *Idlepanai*

Moesgaard Museum, number: EA 344 73-75



3.5. Floor knife

A floor knife made from a piece of wood with an up-standing knife and a peeler. It is used for cutting vegetables and fish and peeling the inside of coconuts. When used the floor knife is placed on the floor while one foot holds it in place. Esther Fihl bought it for around 9 Indian Rupees in 1981.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Width: 7 cm, length: 40 cm, height: 23 cm

Materials: Wood, iron

Fihl's private collection and similar to Moesgaard Museum, inventory number: EA 344 88-90

Photograph: John Simonsen, 2016.



3.6. Fan

The fan is made from a ruffled palm tree leaf with plaited palm leaves along the edge. It is used for two things, when trying to light a fire and when fanning oneself. Members of the Harijan [a term used in 1981 to designate certain low-caste groups] community in Tranquebar made the fan. Esther Fihl bought it for around 0,25 Indian Rupees in 1981. The fan is not a typical item in most fishing households, however it can be found in some of the relatively well-off fishing households.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Width: 26 cm, length: 48 cm

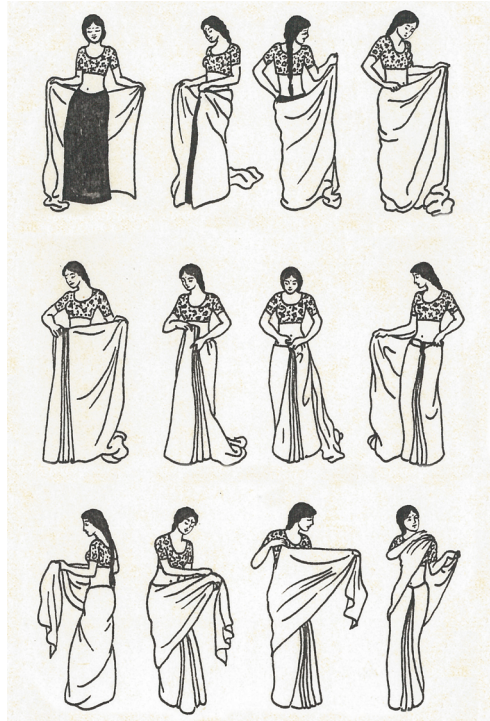
Materials: Palm tree leaves

Local name: *Viseri*

Fihl's private collection and similar to Moesgaard Museum, inventory number: EA 344 61-65

Photograph: John Simonsen, 2016.

4. Other dowry items



4.1 Sari

A sari made of polyester with colorful decorations and typically worn by women from relatively well-off fishing households for everyday use, and by poorer women on special occasions. Besides an undershirt and a short blouse, the garment consists of one single piece of textile, approximately 4,50 meter long. This piece of textile is worn draped around the body. A snip of the textile is fastened to the undershirt at the waist and a long or medium length skirt is formed with pleats to the front, and the rest of the length of textile is draped over the breasts and shoulder. Among the women in the fishing community in 1981, the sari is usually worn medium long, since it makes walking and working easier, however some women from relatively well-off fishing families wear their sari longer. Locally, this type of polyester or nylon textiles is referred to as “silk”. Fihl’s collection of material objects from 1981 also includes additional simple cotton saris normally worn for everyday use by poorer women, however this sari was more likely to be included as part of a girl’s dowry.

Source: Moesgaard Museum entry, produced by Fihl in 1981, digitalized and edited in 2015 by Sofie Vilhelmsen.

Width: 130 cm, length: 460 cm

Materials: Polyester

Local name: *Budavai*

Moesgaard Museum, number: EA 344 153-155

Drawing: Elsebet Morville, 1985.

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