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Bridewealth and the productive and reproductive autonomy of women in the Pacific

Coordinators

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Session presentation

Bridewealth is a conspicuous component of many marriages in the Pacific; it has been vital to both reproduction and reconfiguring Pacific environments. However, the society that it reproduces has changed, and especially the place of married and unmarried women in it. The constraints bridewealth has on women's productive and reproductive autonomy in the contemporary Pacific begins with its definition, and how it is said to obligate women. Anthropologists since the mid-twentieth century analyzed bridewealth as an analogy for economy and cosmology, while mentioning the relationships of bridewealth to women's autonomy as an ancillary issue. The analytic focus in the twenty-first century shifted to themes that were once captured only in the ethnographers' peripheral vision. However, the ways Pacific women embrace bridewealth in 'traditional marriage', and use it to enable new social actions in both family and workplace is not fully understood. Possible topics include women's health; child spacing and limits; divorces and child custody; gender relations; marital relationships, including relations with in-laws; and access to land, including women's economic dependence or independence.

Papers

Bridewealth a pardon: New relationships and restoration of good daughters

Nalisa Fay Mavoho Neuendorf (James Cook University)

This paper explores bridewealth as a site of innovation recognising a novel expression of female agency. I focus on the contemporary experience of women in the small remote community of Baimuru station (Gulf province, Papua New Guinea). The stories depict women, able to act within particular social interactions to create new relationships with men. I do not discount that women continue to be vulnerable within interactions. Rather, I assert the contemporary experience realises women engage in relationships that are not 'predetermined'. They are now more unrestrained in choosing a partner, than in previous times. As women exert agency, the community labels them as 'not good' pakoro dipi mikio

[very bad], but there is acknowledgement that this is a choice. Exertion of agency: assumes women to be bad; is much talked about (rumour and gossip); has varied response, including violence. Bridewealth or other compensatory exchange can provide a pardon for women and resolution for the outcomes of a courtship. Wardlow (2006: 101) recognised “bridewealth confers value and dignity on female gender”. The process of exchange transforms women to being good, restoring functional roles while restricting their level of agency. I argue that bridewealth exchange in Baimuru is significantly redefined by women’s agency in their choice of sexual partners and effectively potential husband. Further, it is a process of absolution for women, while also an avenue for recognition of chosen relationships.

Roads, flowers and braed praes - Women in Port Vila

Penner Angelina (University of Bergen)

My paper is based on a six-months fieldwork in Vanuatu’s capital Port Vila. Vanuatu is a popular place for international Development agencies, which particularly often target the situation of women with buzzwords like “women’s empowerment”, “Gender equality” and “Gender Based Violence”. This rhetoric is used in reports and awareness campaigns by international organisation, but it is also adopted by local institutions, organisations and women’s groups. The mainstream Development discourse reproduces a man/perpetrator: woman/victim dichotomy, that is troublesome in many ways. Especially the depiction of women as unempowered will be questioned in the paper. One of the most central and most debated practice, in that context, is braed praes (Bislama). A simple translation into the euro-centric concept of bride price is not possible, although it occurs frequently. I will present a case of an urban wedding and juxtapose it to the rhetoric used in mainstream reports about bride price in Vanuatu. I argue that the role of Ni-Vanuatu women as creators of relationships and carriers of knowledge are key concepts in Ni-Vanuatu society which are undervalued in Development discourses. Eventually, I argue that the underlying problem between Development discourse and everyday life experiences of Ni-Vanuatu women is based on fundamental misunderstandings of ontological concepts, which lead to an emerging elite class in contemporary Port Vila.

Behind bridewealth: The hidden and open aspects of marriage transactions in Lifou, Loyalty Islands

Anna Painsi (Università degli Studi di Verona)

The practice of bridewealth in Lifou cannot be discussed on its own, rather it should be considered within the plurality of hidden and open ceremonial acts which are needed in order to legitimize a marriage as customary. What do these transactions mean? Where does agency lie? Through an analysis of ethnographic materials from my fieldwork in Lifou, Loyalty Islands, I will consider how Lifouan women are engaged in and perceive these ceremonial and cultural acts. The paper will also try to understand the different reasons behind the felt necessity to regulate customary marriages to contrast the phenomenon of inflation. Customary authorities have set new regulations limiting the amounts of money and cloth to be contributed by the different sets of participants such as ifaxa (married sister) or mathin (mother’s brother) and

recommending how the gifts should be later redistributed, for example increasing the amount set aside for the newly-wed couple. It's a series of minor and larger transactions, some of which take place in the back stage, others in public view, and most of them involve women as donors and/or receivers.

Brideprice and Prejudice: A Visual Ethnography on Marriage and Modernity in Mt Hagen

Rosita Henry (James Cook University)

Daniela Vavrova (James Cook University)

The relationship between bridewealth and women's autonomy is not only an issue or problem for anthropologists, development practitioners and other scholars, but may also be a hot topic of debate among brides themselves, including women who continue embrace such marital exchanges, despite their knowledge of 'modern' development discourse about the constraints of brideprice on women's status and wellbeing and its links to gender-based violence. This paper provides a visual exploration of contemporary brideprice practices and women's autonomy in Mt Hagen. We draw on scenes from our ethnographic film (An Extraordinary Wedding: Marriage and Modernity in Highlands PNG) to explore deliberations and developments that occurred in the case of a particular marriage that took place in 2012. We argue that the institution of brideprice enhances the visibility of some women and the importance of their contribution to their own and husband's kin groups. As such, despite (or perhaps because of) current tensions regarding the practice, brideprice potentially serves as an avenue for the enhancement of women's political participation.

Bridewealth and the reproductive autonomy of women: the case of young educated women in Honiara, Solomon Islands

Christine Jourdan (Concordia University, Montreal)

Fabienne Labbé (Aix-Marseille University, CNRS, EHESS)

In the capital city of the Solomon Islands, bridewealth is often given to formalize the marriage of young couples from the island of Malaita. For the young wife, bridewealth is a reminder that she is expected to produce many children for the lineage of her husband, an obligation that is at times strongly impressed upon her by her in-laws. Data gathered in Honiara over the last 15 years, most recently in 2015-2016, show the emergence of a variety of patterns among Malaitan women living in Honiara regarding the number, the spacing and the timing of their children. While some have 6 or 7 children, others seek to limit them to 3. Beyond their diversity, what these data reveal, we argue, is that young educated women living in Honiara increasingly challenge the coercive power of bridewealth to control the number, the spacing and the timing of the children they have. We especially aim to demonstrate that, as members of an emerging new middle-class, these Malaitan women living in Honiara seek (either in agreement with their husbands, or in spite of them) to transform the meaning of bridewealth: while showing respect to their in-laws and to tradition, their goal is to gain greater control over their reproduction within the confine of bridewealth sociality.

‘Kwatena’ (gift) and ‘Duuna’ (payback with interest): Rethinking Marriage Related Exchanges and the Agency of Women among the Langalanga, Solomon Islands

Pei-yi Guo (Academia Sinica (Taiwan))

This paper examines how Langalanga people in the Solomon Islands practice bridewealth exchanges, and how various women work with or around the *kastom* in building their own lives in contemporary society. Similar to many in the Pacific, the mainstream discourse in Langalanga argues that instead of ‘selling daughter’, bridewealth is *kwatena* (gift), and is thus significant in building social relations. Two things make the Langalanga case special. First, they are the main producer for several kinds of shell money that are widely used in the region as objects of bridewealth exchange. Second, in addition to the commonly seen presentation of large-sum shell money from the groom’s to the bride’s family, there is a special kind of marriage related exchange in Langalanga—*duuna* (payback with interest), which involves various relatives from both sides through numerous and minor rounds of pay and repay. I will discuss how Langalanga women, through participating in shell money economy, build their economic and social lives along the continuation of bridewealth practices and the relational networks constructed by *duuna*. Recently, the emphasis of bridewealth as gift exchange has fostered a more elaborated ‘dowry’ in the form of bridal dress made of shell money. The paper will illustrate how the new dowry format enables young women to take control of the possession and enjoys higher autonomy.

Bridewealth and the use of contraceptive methods in Port-Vila, Vanuatu

Alice Servy (Aix-Marseille University, CNRS, EHESS (France))

In Vanuatu, the practice of bridewealth differs from one island to another. Yet, it is generally viewed as a means to transfer women’s productive and reproductive capacities from their family to their husband’s one. Despite the local importance attached to this practice, bridewealth is frequently criticised by national and international organizations based in Port-Vila, the capital city of Vanuatu, because it is considered to impede women’s reproductive autonomy. In this paper, I analyze to what extent bridewealth influences the use of contraceptive methods in the informal settlement of Seaside Tongoa in Port-Vila. It appears that the only case where a direct link can be found concerned women’s sterilization. Regarding the use of contraceptive pills or injections, several intertwined factors seem to be in play that observations made during a doctoral fieldwork of eighteen months in Vanuatu will help to reveal. In particular, women’s reproductive autonomy is constrained by the control men want to have on the fecundity of their sexual partners, and this independently of whether or not the Christian marriage has already taken place and the bridewealth given. In the end, the paper argues that bridewealth is only one among several factors that influence women’s reproductive autonomy in Port-Vila.

The future of 'brideprice': Perspectives from the Fathers of Australian-Educated, Papua New Guinean Brides

Karen Sykes (University of Manchester)

This paper is based in research into the meaning of bride wealth exchanges within Papua New Guinean extended households that have settled into a primary residence in Australia. Elsewhere I have described how the introduction of financial products (mortgages) into the arrangement of bridewealth have come to reshape contemporary relations with consanguine relatives, and altered temporal perspectives on cycles of exchange with affines. Here I develop that argument by examining in greater detail the fathers' perspective on bridewealth for their daughters. My research showed that many PNG men were deeply ambivalent about accepting bridewealth for their Australian-educated daughters, Many fathers wished their daughters to have the choice to marry according to their own likes and wishes. I conclude that in circumstances in which the youngest generation of PNG women are expected to seek out other livelihoods at great distance from PNG, fathers can play a key role in the creation of PNG women's autonomy.