12. Paradoxical Intimacies: The Christian Creation of the Huli Domestic Sphere

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Introduction

It is tempting to imagine that the Christian missionisation project in the Pacific is a *fait accompli*—that is, that the missionary aims of conversion, and the consequent transformations of Pacific families and subjectivities, are not only events of the past, but also that Christianity itself was long ago indigenised and now is wholly something of the Pacific, not something that should be thought of as an external imposition. However, *conversion* is a term and process that encompasses a multiplicity of embodied and relational transformations. More than a matter of inner subjective faith, it also entails manifestations of one’s religiosity—daily externalisations or practices that evidence (to others and to oneself) one’s Christian identity. And, as is discussed in this chapter, such practices can, long after a community’s conversion, continue to be a source of ambivalence and frustration—that is, they can continue to feel like external impositions—leading some individuals to see the organisation of their daily lives as a site of imperfection and as an indication of the failure to achieve a complete Christian identity. Specifically, this chapter discusses the ongoing painful paradoxes of spousal co-residence or co-habitation—the expectation that properly Christian spouses should live together in the same house—among the Huli of Papua New Guinea.

One way of framing this issue is to say that Christian missionaries among the Huli in the 1950s set out to create a Huli domestic sphere where, arguably, there previously was not one, or at least not one that was easily legible to colonial administrators, missionaries, census takers, or even anthropologists, who have wrestled productively and critically with how to define both “the household” as a bounded, countable unit and “the domestic sphere” as a particular kind of gendered social space. Pre-colonial Huli spatial organisation of spouses and their offspring posed a problem to Christian missionaries’ notions of family and, conversely, the Christian imperative of conjugal co-residence generated problems that Huli couples continue to grapple with. In particular, I discuss
three inter-related problems posed by this imperative: “sexual pollution”—that is, the corporeal hazards of excessive spousal proximity; male anxieties about “being known too well” by one’s wife; and domestic violence.

**Christianity and spousal co-residence**

The churches that have historically had the most adherents among the Huli—the Catholic Church, the United Church (formerly the Methodists), and the Evangelical Church of Papua (formerly the Asia Pacific Christian Mission)—all established their missions in the Tari area of Southern Highlands Province (now Hela Province) in the late 1950s or early 1960s, and they continue, along with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, to have the most members, with the Catholic Church and the United Church being the most prominent and well-established. Although these churches differed theologically in many respects, they shared two specific, concrete objectives when it came to transforming the nature of Huli marriage: bringing polygyny to an end and promoting the adoption of spousal co-residence or co-habitation.

I should note that I have not carried out archival or oral history research about the early missions or former expatriate missionaries. Thus, I cannot speak to how the different missions went about achieving these objectives, the ways in which they might have collaborated or competed in trying to realise these aims, or how they might have differently understood and discursively represented the spousal relations and domestic forms they initially encountered. Rather, my research is based on ethnographic methods—including surveys, interviews with married men and women, and participant observation in a wide range of households—and my assertions derive from the fact that among Huli Christians (which would, in fact, be most Huli) these two interventions into the household (spousal co-residence and having only one wife at a time) are the ones that continue to be troublesome issues still much mulled over by many married couples.

On a global level, more scholarly attention has been paid to the practice of polygyny, which has perhaps seemed more exotic to Western scholars and has thus inspired more of a “will to know,” than to the practice of deliberate conjugal residential separation. Indeed, in anthropology, there is no simple gloss for the latter practice, and the analytical focus tends to be on gender separation or “sexual pollution” beliefs and practices. Moreover, the former is more often discursively figured as a problem, particularly in the current era when polygyny is often associated with HIV in the popular and public health imagination as well as with male dominance and male sexual privilege. Paradoxically, it is the issue of spousal co-habitation—or how spouses are supposed to spatially and architecturally arrange their conjugal lives—that has posed more of a
predicament for Huli couples (which is not to say that polygyny is not also a difficult predicament). That this issue is more prominent than concerns over polygyny is largely due to the fact that given the continual inflation and monetisation of bridewealth very few Huli men can actually afford to become polygynous. However, all Huli married couples must decide whether they will share a house or whether they will maintain separate residences. And, this is how it is usually framed: as a decision that must be made and that typically requires consultation and discussion (though of course urban-based couples often have no choice given the shortage and expense of housing). Although there are certainly Huli couples who can each unproblematically assume of the other that living together is the “normal” and expected thing to do, and probably still couples, though far fewer of them, who can each unproblematically assume of the other that living separately is the best option, for many Huli the decision about marital residence represents a fork in the road where one path must be chosen. It is a decision shaped by myriad factors: the domestic arrangements that one’s parents had; specific pedagogical and admonitory messages imparted by parents, aunts, uncles and already married peers; how one met one’s spouse-to-be and how one assesses that relationship (i.e. modern and romantic or more traditional); and, of course, one’s Christian identity and what one believes is necessary for practising and manifesting that identity.

And, although the question of one house or two is the first and most fundamental one that has to be faced, each choice sets in motion an array of other questions and practices to be negotiated. For example, if a couple lives separately, how often should the husband come visit his wife in her house? When spouses choose residential separation, their houses may be quite distant from each other, and it is the husband who does the visiting unless he has specifically asked his wife to bring something to his house (a pig, an item of clothing he left with her to wash). Thus, will his visits be weekly, daily, twice daily? Will he join his wife for dinner and expect her to cook for him? If so, how often? Traditionally, Huli men cooked for themselves and, indeed, would not accept food from the hands of women, so whether or how often a wife cooks for her husband is another related issue that must be negotiated. Also, how much freedom will he give her in shaping the composition of her household—may she invite her unmarried


or divorced sisters and cousins to live with her, or should this be prohibited? Conversely, if they decide to share a house, will they still maintain separate rooms? Will they divide the house into two sides, with one for the husband and one for his wife and young children? Will he continue to maintain a separate residence elsewhere, or spend much of his time in the clan men’s house, or not?

These questions can be daunting for newly married couples, as can the later consequences of the choices they make, particularly since spousal co-residence continues to be described as “not Huli custom” and as inherently problematic. In the pre-colonial past not only did husbands and wives live separately, men often maintained multiple residences as part of a political-economic strategy of preserving social ties with a wide range of maternal and paternal kin and of exercising claims to many areas of land on different clan territories. Moreover, as Robert Glasse and Bryant Allen have shown, Huli men tended to be highly mobile: they moved from one house on one clan territory to another house on another clan territory every few days or weeks; they were often mobile for purposes of trade, warfare or ritual; they resided for periods of time with other men in clan men’s houses; and at other times they resided in their own houses, by themselves or with older sons. And there are some older men who still prefer to live in this highly peripatetic way: they keep a pot and spoon in each house, or carry these and a few items of clothing with them, and regularly move between different houses and territories, usually keeping their most important belongings (for example, the wigs made of human hair for which the Huli are so famous) in the safety of a clan men’s house. Never, however, did they reside with their wives.

Thus, it is not surprising that older women in my various interview samples, whether from 1990s or 2000s, have typically responded, when asked about the nature of their relationship with their husband, “I don’t know. I never saw him,” or “I only saw him when he came to give me more children” (that is, he came to have sex), or “I only saw him when he came to take my pigs for a compensation payment” or, more happily, “I only saw him when he came to give me some pork from a feast he had attended.” One should not necessarily take these assertions as transparent statements of fact; they can also be idioms for talking about the emotionally distant or strained quality of a relationship, and sometimes they are exaggerated performances intended to evoke laughter from other women. Nevertheless, these statements do correspond to older men’s assertions about their highly mobile lives, and their lack of belonging to a single, intransitory domestic sphere.

Women, for their part, resided in a house their husband had built for them, often with the husband’s mother, unmarried sisters, or their young children and not-yet-married daughters. This arrangement constitutes a kind of domestic sphere, but one in which the nucleus is composed of women and children, while men move about like electrons, forging bonds here one day, forging bonds there another day, and so on. From the perspective of an early missionary it could easily have seemed that there was no domestic sphere, or at least not one that was inhabited in any robust way by men. Thus, an initial governmental and moral project for Christian missionaries was to create a Huli domestic sphere that included an authoritative, fixed adult masculine presence. From a governmental perspective, a normalised household with a male head not only accorded with what expatriate missionaries found familiar and proper, but was also more legible, and more easily monitored and intervened in.

However, the project of creating the conjugally co-habiting Huli domestic sphere was also a moral undertaking intended to make Huli marriages conform to the ideal Euro-Australian domestic arrangements that missionaries considered both superior and necessary for creating properly Christian gender relations.\(^4\) As Adele Perry notes of Christian missionary interventions into First Nations people’s domestic arrangements in the Canadian colonial context, household organisation—indeed, the architecture of the housing itself—was thought of by missionaries as “an animate social force that was generative of proper gender roles, work habits, and domestic ways.”\(^5\) Perry also discusses the ways in which mobility, and lack of fixed abode, was associated with primitiveness in the missionary imagination; thus, for example, she notes a missionary proposal to build a sawmill in order to supply “these nomads with building material, wherewith to erect houses and other buildings, and thus encourage them to settle down to domestic life.”\(^6\)

In the Huli context, the fixed and settled nuclear family—with parents and children all living, praying, and attending church together—was considered the best suited for socialising children into the daily practices of being Christian and thereby transmitting Christian faith and its habitus from one generation to the


\(^6\) Perry, “From ‘the hot-bed of vice,’” p. 597.
next. Moreover, because the Catholic Church was the first and best-established mission among the Huli, it is important to remember that the Catholic Church elevates the institution of marriage to a sacrament, citing the biblical verses John 2:1–11 about Jesus turning water into wine at a critical moment during a wedding at Cana. From this perspective, marriage is more than a social institution; it confers sanctifying grace on both spouses, and it is a symbol and manifestation of the divine union between Christ, the Bridegroom, and His Church, the Bride. Thus, carrying out marriage properly constitutes participation in the divine life of God Himself. Finally, if missionary discourse today is reflective of past perceptions and judgements, it is likely that Christian missionaries found Huli marriages affectively deficient and, in particular, insufficiently companionate, and it was probably hoped that co-residence, paired with Christian conversion, would eventually bring about more emotionally intimate marital relations.7

Huli people have taken this moral project to heart, even as they continue to find it difficult to put into practice. The passage in the Bible that I have most often heard cited by Huli men and women as evidence that God wants Christian spouses to live together is Matthew 19:4-6:

> Haven’t you read, he replied, that at the beginning the Creator “made them male and female,” and said, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.

In point of fact, this verse is Jesus’ response to what seems to be a baiting question from some Pharisees about the permissibility of divorce and, in particular, under what circumstances it is justified and why Moses would have made a provision for divorce if God was so opposed to it, as Jesus seems to suggest. In other words, the verse is not addressing married couples’ residential proximity; rather, it responds to the question of whether wives can be set aside and abandoned if a man wants to marry a substitute wife. However, I have most often heard Huli men and women invoke this verse not to condemn divorce, but rather to talk about conjugal co-habitation as the properly Christian way to conduct marriage and construct households. This usage leads me to surmise that expatriate Christian missionaries among the Huli deployed this verse to this purpose, and that Huli adherents subsequently replicated this interpretation, seeing it as proof that God wants married couples to live in one house.

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Spousal co-habitation as *askesis*, or ethical practice

I have suggested that the above verse from Matthew has been interpreted and mobilised in the Huli context in a way that seems different from, but not antithetical to, its original biblical intent. It must be acknowledged, however, that this verse does, in fact, say much more than that men should not casually set aside one wife for another. For one, it says that men should leave their natal families, which perhaps suggests an argument for neolocal spousal co-residence. More significantly, it metaphorically asserts that a man’s emotional and pragmatic loyalties should lie with his wife. It also uses evocative language about fleshly union to emphasise that married couples are no longer lone monads in the world (not that they ever were in traditional Huli conceptualisations of personhood), but should instead think of themselves as divinely bound to each other. Put succinctly, the verse suggests that marriage is much more than a social institution and should be approached as a moral undertaking or spiritual project.

This particular Bible verse has gained much traction in the Huli imagination, perhaps in part because the idea that marriage is a moral project—or at least a very specific kind of relationship that requires adherence to practices that have larger social or even cosmological ramifications—has affinities with Huli constructions of marriage (even as their actual practices depart markedly from missionary visions of wives as helpmeets of husbands). Thus, for example, the practice of spousal residential separation was never only about men’s strategies for keeping up political ties and claims to land. It was always also about individual, social and territorial or environmental health and vitality. As Nicole Haley notes, the cultural groups in this region of Papua New Guinea “hold to the belief that moral behaviour conserves fertile substance, and that immoral behaviour sees it depleted and will ultimately bring about the world’s end,”8 and moral behaviour included the rigorous separation of the genders. Thus, in contrast to Christian missionary notions about the marital project, distance, not proximity, was the key to conducting marriage safely and properly.

The Huli have long used the management of social space, and especially distanciation, in order to facilitate adherence to moral dictates, called *mana*, and much of this deliberate social engineering of space is directed at controlling covetous desire, whether for things or for people. Key to Huli moral philosophy is that one is far less likely to covet that which one cannot apprehend with one’s senses, and perhaps particularly, that which one cannot see or smell.  

Certainly, one need not see or smell something in order to feel desire for it, but perceptual immediacy and physical proximity can trigger desire, exacerbate it, and make acting on desires much more difficult to resist. Thus, an important way to exert some control over immoral (and potentially cosmologically destructive) action is to shape the socio-material environment in ways that limits sensual apprehension of desirable things. Thus, Huli houses tend to be quite distant from each other, surrounded by deep trenches and tall stands of trees. People walking by cannot see into another family’s property or smell them cooking, and people say that this spatial arrangement morally protects both those who live within and without: those who live within are less vulnerable to violations, such as theft; those outside are less vulnerable to dangerous desires that might inspire them to engage in immoral acts. Similarly, that husbands and wives live separately makes it easier to adhere to the *mana* that says that spouses should only have sex on days eleven through fourteen of a wife’s menstrual cycle and should abstain from sex during pregnancy and until the child can follow simple instructions such as “go fetch that piece of firewood.”

Thus, men live like electrons in continuous orbit in part so that they do not have to rely entirely on willpower and self-discipline to control sexual desire. Huli people say that in the past the carefully constructed socio-moral environment made self-discipline easier. In the idiom that I have heard from men and women for almost twenty years now, “We used to be fenced in, and we were healthy and thrived because we were fenced in. Now, with the coming of roads and stores and markets and towns, we are no longer fenced in.” This, I should make clear, is always grimly asserted as a bad thing (although in other conversational contexts roads are consistently spoken of as good and necessary). In other words, one can contain and control desire through the proper habitation of space, and this proper habitation more often is about preserving distance than promoting proximity—whether between spouses, between neighbours, between other cultural groups, or between my eyes and some object I might covet but should not consume. To be clear, what the missionaries were encouraging was an entirely opposite logic: where Huli spatio-moral logic dictated physical separation and emotional distance between spouses, the missionaries called for physical proximity and emotional intimacy. (Moreover, missionaries continue to make this call in the present: the insistence that married couples adhere to

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9 Wardlow, *Wayward Women*.

10 Ballard, “The centre cannot hold.”
the “B”—be faithful—of the HIV prevention ABC message may sound merely behavioural, but it is not. Rather, there is, I believe, an implicit assumption that marriages in Papua New Guinea, Africa and elsewhere are insufficiently intimate and companionate, and that if they were sufficiently so, HIV would not be as widespread as it is.)

The ambivalence that many Huli married couples continue to feel about marital proximity is reflected in their living arrangements. For example, a survey I conducted in the mid-1990s in order to obtain a sense of prevalence for these opposed ways of spatialising marriage showed that at that time two-thirds of the married men sampled were living with their wife in one house, while one-third were living in their own house and had built a separate house for a wife. This was a very simple survey, and did not filter results according to important variables, such as the age of the men or level of education; however, it did provide a rough sense of what couples were doing. At that time, there seemed to be a trend towards co-residence, with a number of men asserting that when they had to rebuild their house they intended to build one big family house. In 2004, however, I interviewed two married couples who had each been practising conjugal co-residence but had decided to try living in separate residences. Both husbands considered themselves devout Christians, but felt that living together in one house compromised, rather than enabled, their ability to be good Christians because, they said, it caused them to verbally and physically fight. They hoped that living separately would enable them to refrain from unChristian practices, such as swearing at each other, physically injuring each other, and deliberately trying to insult each other and hurt each other’s feelings. They firmly believed that good Christian spouses were supposed to live together in one house, and they cited the verse from the Gospel of Matthew as evidence, but felt they were not capable of it. In sum, my combined interview, participant observation, and survey data all suggest that 1) many couples believe that co-residence is something God wants of Christian spouses, 2) a majority of couples have adopted spousal co-residence, though not all have done this for explicitly or solely religious reasons, 3) nevertheless, not all couples strive for this domestic arrangement, and 4) this arrangement is still largely seen as something introduced, not normalised or ordinary, and it is still spoken of by men in particular, as unnatural and difficult.

Indeed, for a few men, marital co-residence has been undertaken as what could be called a form of askesis—that is, following Aristotle and Michel Foucault, a kind of ethical self-work that one undertakes in order to transform the self through embodied practice. According to philosopher Tamar Gendler, Aristotle asserts that a principal way to bring about ethical change in the self so that one’s actions come to be in line with one’s ethical commitments “is to make a
conscious effort to behave in the ways that our commitments dictate, so that these patterns of behavior become familiar and habitual.”11 Quoting Aristotle, she says,

We learn a craft by producing the same product that we must produce when we have learned it—becoming builders, for example, by building, and harpists by playing the harp. So also, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions. A state of character arises from the repetition of similar activities…. It is not unimportant, then, to acquire one sort of habit or another … rather, it is very important, indeed all-important.12

In other words, the deliberate rehearsal of practices—which may initially feel awkward and alien, but which one has deemed virtuous—can, with repetition over time, enable one to transform one’s acting, and perhaps feeling, self into the desired self of one’s ethical imagination. Some Huli men talk about efforts to achieve harmonious spousal co-habitation in ways that are reminiscent of Aristotle’s privileging of praxis (rather than contemplation or trying to persuade or convert oneself to an ethically desirable objective). In interviews and in informal conversations they spoke of deciding that co-residence was the properly Christian way to organise a household and, having made this commitment, they sought out priests or pastors (and, more recently, counsellors working for Médecins sans Frontières and Population Services International) in order to learn the required knowledge and skills of companionate, co-habiting marriage. In particular, they spoke of the importance of talk—that is, about learning and practising new ways of speaking to and with a wife. For example, some discussed engaging in deliberate and repeated acts of complimenting a wife, asking for her advice, and praising her skills. In interviews in 2004, a few men laughed at how awkward they initially felt complimenting a wife on her cooking or on how skilfully she divided up food so that everyone felt satisfied. However, as Aristotle suggests, these men said that such practices worked, both in the sense of achieving greater harmony in the domestic sphere and in terms of the men becoming more fluid and adept at these practices. Philosopher and scholar of Aristotle, Jonathan Lear, notes that, “Habits … do not merely instill a disposition to engage in certain types of behavior; they instill a sensitivity as to how to act in various circumstances,”13 and I think this also can be said of the few Huli men who talked about deliberately cultivating certain ways of speaking and acting in order to achieve the properly Christian domestic sphere. The practice of complimenting a wife made men more attentive to when a wife’s behaviour might merit particular acknowledgement.

Engaging in *askesis*—that is, embodied ethical training or practice—particularly in the context of marriage, is not, in fact, a new idea to the Huli. As I suggested earlier, the idea that marriage is a difficult undertaking that requires specific knowledge, self-discipline, and the rehearsal and eventual habituation of corporeal and verbal acts is a long-held and deeply familiar one to Huli men. In the past, men paid ritual experts to teach them a variety of practices in preparation for marriage: they learned a particular position for having sex; they learned to drink water from mountain springs in order to purify the body after sex; they learned to both stay away from a wife’s house and to wash themselves frequently when a wife was menstruating; and they learned attentiveness to certain signs that a wife might be practising a magic intended to give her greater influence over him. And although all these practices were primarily directed at maintaining the man’s health, vitality and social efficacy, they were also thought to be important for maintaining the fecundity of clan land and the potency of the clan itself. So, much as Aristotle conceptualised *askesis*, this ethical self-work was in service not only of the individual, but also the health of the larger group or polity. Thus, we can see a kind of continuity here in the sense that in both the pre-colonial incarnation and the Christian version, marriage is an undertaking that requires knowledge, moral attention and praxis, though, of course, the profound difference is that the pre-Christian marital project required attention to the marital other at a self and community enforced distance, while the Christian marital project requires an *askesis*—an ethical exercise—that entails an almost constant dialogic interaction with the marital other.

**The challenges of marital co-residence**

The men who feel that they are successful in marital co-habitation express a sense of accomplishment and pride. For example, in interviews that my four male field assistants carried out with Huli married men in 2004, interviewees were asked to discuss how their marriage and home-life was similar to and or different from that of their parents. The answers were often evaluative, even judgemental, and were typically phrased as: “I am a better husband and father than my own father was.” Evidence cited to support this claim were practices such as: eating with one’s wife, living in the same house with one’s wife, talking daily and at length and with a sense of pleasure with one’s wife, and spending more time with one’s children. The reason some men are so proud of their ability to carry out harmonious co-residence is not only because they feel more in accord with Christian ethical commitments or because they consider themselves more modern than previous generations, but also because they
fully recognise the difficulties of this enterprise and the problematic paradoxes of intimacy that can emerge because of spousal co-habitation.\textsuperscript{14} So, what are these paradoxes or difficulties?

First and foremost, there is the problem of “menstrual pollution” or, more broadly, “sexual pollution”; terms meant to capture the idea that opposite-sex corporeal proximity, and particularly female reproductive fluids, pose a danger. These terms have been critiqued; however, they capture, to some extent, how many Huli men think and, more importantly, seem to phenomenologically feel about the consequences of excessive co-presence or intimacy with women, especially wives. Specifically, Huli men and women assert that there is a corporeal porosity or permeability between spouses;\textsuperscript{15} thus, not only are a spouse’s sexual fluids potentially dangerous, but also his or her talk, emotions and actions can all constitute substances, of a sort, that can get into one’s body and affect one, often negatively.

One problem with the term “pollution,” then, to convey these ideas and experiences is its association with physical matter. Perhaps because of Western ontological distinctions between physical matter, emotion and sensual apprehensions (such as smells), the term pollution, and perhaps particularly sexual pollution, somewhat narrowly conveys defilement or damage caused by a material substance; it is, classically expressed, “matter out of place.”\textsuperscript{16} Thus, when thinking about “sexual pollution,” the mind tends to jump to the idea that sexual substances (e.g. bodily fluids) are the source of danger. However, when it comes to the ways in which one spouse’s body is vulnerable to the intimacies of the other, the Huli do not make such rigid ontological distinctions. When men talk about the challenges of spousal co-habitation, for example, they say things like, “Breathing in each other’s exhaled breath, smelling each other’s bodies, hearing the same talk day after day, having to touch the things that I know she has touched, feeling that she is angry or hearing her angry words cut me like an axe cutting my foot. All of these things make your skin feel dirty and make you age faster.” In this quote, notably, there is no mention of sexual fluids or menstrual blood as particularly worrying or dangerous substances. Rather, it is the mere daily physical exposure to the other’s breath, smell, touch, emotion and other personal emanations that results in a phenomenological sense of defilement or erosion. All these sensory encounters or exchanges are like physical substances that penetrate the body and gradually damage it,

\textsuperscript{14} Holly Wardlow, “’She liked it best when she was on top’: intimacies and estrangements in Huli Men’s marital and extramarital relationships,” in \textit{Intimacies: Love and Sex across Cultures}, ed. W. Jankowiak, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, pp. 194–223.

\textsuperscript{15} Wardlow, \textit{Wayward Women}; Wardlow, “’She liked it best when she was on top.’”

suggesting that “sexual pollution” is (and perhaps always has been) not only about “matter out of place,” but also about emotions, words and gestures out of place. Alternatively, sexual pollution does, indeed, concern matter out of place; however, what constitutes matter may be highly variable and may not entail the physical attributes (mass, weight) typically associated with that term.

One might be tempted to assert that these are physical idioms for talking about emotional states of distress or for expressing broader discontent with the relationship, and I think it is true that Huli men and women tend to feel more polluted or sullied by their spouses when there is marital strife, and tend not to worry about these issues so much when the marriage is harmonious. Nevertheless, I think it is important to take seriously the fact that men and women consistently talk about these experiences as physical—as processes that they can often feel happening to their bodies as they happen. And, although women use this kind of phenomenological, sensory discourse of corporeal porosity and pollution less than men, they do also use it. They say, for example, that they can feel it inside their bodies when their husbands have sexually cheated on them, asserting that such actions remain on the skin of their husband, and thus that simply being enclosed in the same house with those smells and past actions emanating from a husband’s body begins to make them feel weak and sick. Thus, rather than interpret these assertions as metaphors or idioms for talking about other experiential domains, they should be taken seriously as bodily experiences, and as experiences that continually constitute and help to define what it means for Huli married couples to be embodied and to have an embodied relationship with another.

Sara Ahmed’s discussion of the relationship between emotion and bodily boundaries in her article “Collective Feelings, Or the Impressions Left by Others” is both evocative and productive for deconstructing the ontological barriers one might erect between the emotions of others and the physically experiencing self. She asserts that

I become aware of my body as having a surface only in the event of feeling discomfort…. It is through the intensification of feeling that bodies and worlds materialise and take shape, or that the effect of boundary, fixity and surface is produced. Feelings are not about the inside getting out or the outside getting in, but that they affect the very distinction of inside and outside in the first place…. [The] contradictory function of skin begins to make sense if we unlearn the assumption that the skin is simply already there, [and] begin to think of the skin as a surface that is felt only in the event of being “impressed upon” in the encounters we have with others. To consider the way emotions are implicated in the

17 Many thanks to Margaret Jolly for helping me to see this implication.
surfacing of bodies and worlds we can reflect on the word impression…. We need to remember the press in impression. It allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very mark left by the press of one surface upon another…. The impression is a sign of the persistence of others even in the face of their absence.18

In Ahmed’s evocation, much as in Huli conceptualisations, there is no a priori bodily exterior that keeps the (gendered) other out; rather, the self is constructed as vulnerable and as having a bodily boundary that is emergent, dialogic and porous. In this passage Ahmed seems particularly preoccupied with touch, and the emotions and bodily boundaries materialised and solidified by touch, but what Ahmed asserts about touch can equally apply to the sensations Huli spouses speak of, which tend to be more about smell, or about injurious words, or about the sensation of the other’s angry emotion entering the body, causing it pain, and generating a reciprocal angry emotion in return, all of which resemble the way Ahmed describes touch in that they are spoken of as having or being a materiality that can be felt by the body.

This more phenomenological representation of the malaise of spousal proximity—the feeling of bodily surfaces constantly permeated by various emanations from the conjugal other—helps elucidate what a profound ethical undertaking it is to choose co-habitation. Not only do spouses engage in the previously discussed askesis—teaching oneself the praxis of complimenting a spouse, for example—they must also engage, I think, in a certain kind of bodily remaking, a re-embodiment of sorts in which one attempts to feel not so porous to the other and tries to turn one’s attention away from bodily sensations of being sullied by the other. Writing about the somewhat different topic of the “placebo effect,” Laurence Kirmayer emphasises the importance of both “attentional” and “attributional” mechanisms in mediating the sensations of the body—the former being the ability to focus attention on or away from a bodily sensation,19 thus intensifying or lessening its experience, and the latter being the cognitive models or other interpretive frameworks that shape one’s expectations of a situation (in this case, sustained proximity to a spouse), as well as the meaning one attributes to the situation. Thus, what I am suggesting is that the choice of co-habitation may, for some men, entail a deliberate attempt to modify their own attentional and attributional mechanisms so that their bodies feel less vulnerable or porous to the physical presence of the female conjugal other.

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But, of course, the conceptual and phenomenological remaking of the body is not so easy. More common, especially for men, is the attempt to escape the confines of the shared house by staying in clan men’s houses or by frequenting the rapidly proliferating new public, and yet exclusively male, spaces in Tari, such as drinking clubs or snooker clubs. Some men assert that now that they live with their wives and no longer have their own houses, they have no “room of their own,” as it were—a paradoxical assertion for such a male dominant society—and that they must therefore spend more time drinking and talking with male kin and peers in the safety of clubs that wives are not permitted to enter.

But, of course, the challenges of spousal co-habitation are more than corporeal—they are also epistemological in a way. Indeed, both men and women—though, again, particularly men—talk about the problem of “being known too well.” As one man in the 2004 interview sample put it, “If you live with her, then she comes to know your habits, your ways of thinking, how you do things. Then, if you are arguing, she knows exactly what to say to hurt you and provoke you and make you really angry.” And, according to another,

Some women are very clever. They will study a husband, listen to him, and come to really understand his thoughts and his ways. And then they can take advantage of him and manipulate him.... So I follow the wisdom of the older generation. If I have instructions for her, I stand in the doorway or outside the house and give her the instructions while she’s sitting inside the house.... She cannot see my face or guess how I am feeling.... You can have fun, relaxed conversations with a girlfriend or a sex worker but not with your wife. If you do, she will use that knowledge to dominate you.

Or, as another put it, “My wife is not like my heart. I married her to have my children and take care of my pigs. My secrets are my secrets.... If I told her everything she would use this knowledge to dominate me—that’s the way women are.” Two of my four male field assistants asserted that self-exposure, emotional intimacy, and simply being too well known were the primary causes of marital strife in the contemporary context, and the other two agreed that these were problems, if not the biggest problems. As one of them said, echoing what we were learning through our interviews, “You get to know her too well, and she gets to know you too well, and you stop respecting each other, and it’s too easy to end up fighting because you know what to say to hurt her and she knows the same about you.” There are a range of anxieties bound up in this fear of being too well known—for men, these anxieties focus on the threats to male

20 Wardlow, “Whip him in the head with a stick!”
21 Wardlow, “She liked it best when she was on top.”
dominance and authority that are assumed to be inevitable once a wife gains knowledge of her husband’s desires, vulnerabilities and foibles. For both men and women, there is a fear that the combination of self-exposure and the monotony of excessive familiarity will make the desire to say the perfectly hurtful thing to a spouse almost irresistible. Again, conjugal distance—emotional, physical and epistemological—represents a kind of safeguard.

This latter fear—of being too well known, and thus easily manipulated and verbally injured—leads to the final challenge of spousal co-habitation, a challenge raised by both men and women—that is, domestic violence. Indeed, assertions that spousal co-habitation led to increased physical fighting was often articulated in the same breath as assertions about co-habitation inevitably leading to verbal assault. In other words, the fear that one would not be able to resist saying the perfectly hurtful thing was accompanied by the conviction that once one had said the perfectly hurtful thing, physical violence was unavoidable.

The added concern, particularly for women, is that couples are now expected to fight in the domestic sphere—that is, at home. In the past, women say, when spouses lived separately, it was easier for women to make a point of airing their marital grievances in public. For one, precisely because spouses did not live together a wife was more likely to run into her husband in a public space—at a market, along the road—than in the domestic sphere. Public fighting could help a woman achieve a number of goals. First, public fighting decisively moved a grievance out of the private, often quite hidden sphere of a woman’s house and into the public sphere where there were witnesses who might intervene to stop a fight from becoming too injurious and who might assist a woman in pursuing public mediation of the grievance.22 Public fights were an almost foolproof means for a woman of both initiating a confrontation, but also limiting its potential damage. And public fighting almost always resulted in public discussion and mediation about the cause of the altercation, whether this was a husband’s extramarital escapades, his accusing her unfairly of adultery, or taking her money, pigs or sweet potatoes without permission. Public fighting, according to most women, was better than private fighting: it made marital problems visible; it created a public memory of the dispute, which a woman could later refer to if necessary; and it tended to be less injurious than private fighting because no one had to give in and concede defeat—instead they could rely on others to pull them apart.

But, by all accounts, public fighting is less feasible and less common than in the past. With the adoption of co-habitation, much fighting gets sequestered in the private sphere, where often there are no other adults to intervene or bear witness. When Christian missionaries set out to create the spousally co-habiting

22 Wardlow, Wayward Women, pp. 94–95.
Huli domestic sphere, I doubt they had in mind that domestic violence would become one of its defining features. Surely the missionaries were striving to bring about their vision of the intimate, loving couple characterised by precisely what many Huli people say they struggle with most—mutual self-exposure, enhanced psychological intimacy and greater emotional dependency. However, for many couples, the shared conjugal home not only generates more friction, it also makes each spouse a captive audience to the other, though this is more true of women, who are less able to exit the domestic realm.

Moreover, Christian notions of the properly monogamous and intimate household also include ideas about decorum and propriety—that is, how the Christian family should appear to others in public, and this vision does not include the spectacle of physical altercation. 23 Christian notions of the proper household also entail ideas about female forbearance—that is, the idea that women should be tolerant of men’s lapses in kindness or overt abuse. Indeed, some strains within Catholicism tend to valorise, or even glorify, women’s ability to suffer in quiet dignity. Such religious discourses contradict what Huli female dignity meant in the pre-Christian era: female dignity meant standing up for oneself and not tolerating abuse. Older and middle-aged women I’ve interviewed decisively stated that the reigning ideology was, and for some of them still is, that the failure to physically punish a husband—that is, to hit him, ideally with a stick or some other weapon—when he abuses you only encourages him to do it again and makes other people think you are a coward. To not physically chastise a wayward husband is to indulge and coddle him as if he were a child, and it is to invite future, perhaps even more severe, abuse. The idea that suffering in silence is somehow more virtuous was alien to these older and middle-aged women. However, such gendered ideologies of forbearance have taken hold, and women’s public fighting is now often labelled as unChristian, uneducated, “too traditional” and rural. In other words, not only is women’s public fighting coming to be seen as unseemly and undignified, it also now gets interpreted (by hospital staff, civil servants and other members of an emergent middle class) through a set of binary oppositions (educated/ignorant, urban/rural, civilised/savage, etc.) that quickly define a woman as ignorant and backwards.

Conclusion

I conclude this discussion of spousal co-habitation with a final paradox—which is that it is women who most often advocate for the adoption of spousal co-habitation. This, I must confess, is something I originally found baffling. Having lived in women’s houses where the husband had his own house elsewhere,

23 Wardlow, “Whip him in the head with a stick!”
I saw how women enjoyed the pleasures that come with the freedom from male surveillance: once the husband had made an evening check on the household and gone on his way, the women would often cook another meal just for themselves; they would gamble and smoke, knowing their husbands disapproved; they would invite female kin to visit; and occasionally they would even abscond from the house, moving quickly and quietly up and down the dark mountainside paths in order to visit female family and friends. So, pushing for co-habitation has seemed a paradoxical and sometimes bad tradeoff to me, or at least something that requires an explanation of what might be worth the profound increase in male surveillance and the potential for altercation.

There are a number of reasons why women support co-habitation, all of which relate to the ways in which the public sphere and domestic sphere have been transformed since the pre-colonial era, as well as the ways in which women’s positionality within these spheres has changed. For example, the adoption of the nuclear family home often entails the exit of a man’s mother and sisters. In other words, the increase in surveillance of a woman by her husband is often balanced by a decrease in surveillance by his mother, and co-habitation has the added benefit of increased influence over him, as well as an increased ability to monitor, at least a little, his own comings and goings. And importantly, data from Tari Hospital records show that mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law often fight physically and can inflict serious injury upon each other, such as broken bones or deep cuts. Thus, vulnerability to violence is, and long has been, quite high for married Huli women, even if a husband is not a permanent or regular occupant of the household. Thus, while spousal co-habitation may, indeed, result in the increased frequency of marital physical altercations, it would be a mistake to think that married women were safe from violence in the separate living arrangements of the past. In other words, the bad trade-off in terms of vulnerability to physical aggression and injury may not be as acute as it first might appear.

Moreover, women may be drawn to spousal co-habitation because it can enable increased opportunities to position themselves as domestic-sphere experts through church-sponsored home-craft workshops. These workshops—which, if anything, seem far more pervasive today than they were in the past—have not changed very much in terms of content, and always seem directed at focusing women’s attention narrowly on the domestic sphere. For decades now, for example, Huli women have been recruited into mission-sponsored classes to learn how to sew meri blouses and skirts; crochet colourful yarn flowers to ornament a room; plant decorative flowers around a house; plant “nutrition gardens” stocked with peanuts, beans and tomatoes; and cook meals that include foods from all three food groups. In other words, the unchanging content of

24 Wardlow, Wayward Women, pp. 87–89.
these workshops would seem to suture women into a mutually constitutive relationship with the home, solidifying their identities as housebound home-craft experts through learning to aestheticise the home and make it a site of health production and monitoring.²⁵

Worryingly, the one innovation to these home-skills workshops for women is more direct messaging about the importance of similarly taking the self as an object of aesthetic labour. As I heard one United Church women’s group leader say in 2012,

> Sometimes a woman is covered with dirt from caring for pigs and planting sweet potatoes, and so her husband finds her unattractive. Or she’s had too many children and her body is no longer pretty. So women must think of themselves as their husband’s flower. They must make time to wash themselves and put on nice clothing. Also, women get used up because they have too many children, and so wives should use contraception.

These new messages, originating in and spreading out from churches, about the importance of a wife’s appearance and attractiveness are emerging in the context of, and I think as a specific Christian response to, the increasing prevalence of HIV/AIDS. The concern, of course, is men’s extramarital, extra-domestic sex, and the solution for married couples, as is now familiar, is the “B” in the ABC strategy—that is, “be faithful.” What is relatively new in my experience is that the message for women now seems to be that men would stay at home and be faithful if only women worked harder at being more attractive.²⁶ Again, female subjectivity would seem to be ever more tightly sutured into the home through skill-building and “empowerment”—promoting discourses about aesthetics and disease prevention. I would add that it seems a hard message that married women’s vulnerability to HIV is, by implication, blamed on them and their supposed failures to be aesthetically and affectively pleasing to their husbands.

Arguably, the missions are finally attempting to forge the specifically gendered subjects that they neglected to create when they first told husbands and wives they should live together. In other words, the message about the proper desirability of conjugal co-habitation came first, about fifty years ago, and the attempts to construct the gendered subjectivities and affective performances necessary for making intimate co-habitation work are only coming now in the wake of concerns about HIV. The creation of a domestic sphere characterised by

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²⁶ Wardlow, “The task of the HIV translator.”
an intimate spousal affective life was likely the missionary intent or objective all along, and what has changed is that because of HIV men and women may now be more motivated to cultivate the emotional, corporeal, and verbal gestures and demeanors—that is, the *habitus*—of intimate, faithful, spousal co-habitation.

But, I would close by pointing out that the ramping up of prevention and care efforts in the era of HIV increasingly brings women not only out of the home but often out of Huli territory for attendance at ever-proliferating workshops, courses and training sessions. Such workshops, which are intended to make women into experts of the domestic sphere, have consistently, and perhaps paradoxically, brought women into newly created public spheres, such as training centres or community centres, where, among other things, they spend whole days forging bonds of solidarity with other women and witnessing women act as confident, authoritative and assertive trainers and public speakers. Such workshops make women important elements of the public sphere and give them the moral authority and legitimacy to participate in it; thus, the spousal co-habitation promoted by Christian missions might, in the end, enable increased influence within the domestic sphere as well as create some avenues out of it.

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