

## Chapter 14: 'Wandering Women' and 'Good Women'<sup>1</sup>

Everyone wanted to participate in the Pig Ceremonial—the men and girls to decorate themselves and dance, and the married women to watch the spectacular proceedings and be present at the final mass slaughter of pigs. It was especially important for the men to take part. Failure to do so would deprive them of the rewards of fertility in their wives and pigs and gardens.

At any other time, the prospect of going to gaol for some offence against good order would not have worried them. Imprisonment may be a temporary inconvenience, but no stigma attaches to it. Indeed, people imprisoned for major crimes and sent to Goroka and other places return with heightened prestige; they impress their more provincial kinsmen as tourists coming back with first-hand knowledge of the great world. Even in the more modest gaol at Minj, a man meets and becomes familiar with natives from all over the Wahgi Valley, and he makes useful contacts among the sophisticated coastal policemen. Imprisonment offers an unparalleled opportunity to learn Pidgin English and generally widen the social horizon. The Kuma regard imprisonment less as a punishment for wrong-doing than as a result of action of which the Administration disapproves. Erstwhile warriors complain that pacification has made them soft and weak like women.

When a woman neglects her duties towards her husband or is reluctant to obey his commands, she invites a beating. He is likely to attack her with a hatchet or a stout stick and inflict visible wounds. But she is well aware that the Administration has banned violence, and she may seek redress by displaying her wounds to the Court of Native Affairs. Some of the women were quick to take advantage of the men's well known fear of going to gaol while the Pig Ceremonial was in progress. They flouted the authority of their husbands on numerous occasions, knowing that their husbands were afraid to strike them.

I know of no other woman who went to the lengths that Wozna did, deliberately taunting her husband and even delivering physical blows. But Wozna was a strong young woman, whereas her husband, Wuzig, was both naturally peaceable and physically weak. Wozna would not have dared to defy Wuzig to the same extent if she had been living with his clansmen. She was assured of protection by the presence of her parents and her own clans people. Wuzig,

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter version evidently dates from an earlier form of the manuscript, prior to Reay's having changed indigenous names to English.

riled beyond endurance, eventually raised his arm to strike her, but his wife's clans people restrained him. They were acting in the interests of their brother-in-law in preventing him from going to gaol during the Pig Ceremonial.

Yagumam was also exceptional. She had been a strong and determined woman, so active in women's fights that in her youth she had caused the death of Kkommun's mother. She was exceptional in being a desirable widow who was free to choose whom she would marry and, indeed, whether she would marry at all. Normally, widows are either inherited by their husbands' brothers or given to members of their husbands' subclan. Yagumam had already taken her husband's brother, Tai, as a lover, and he was willing to have her as his fifth wife. But Yagumam knew that she could not settle down peaceably with Tai's other wives, and she preferred to remain a widow. Tai and Wamdi had two reasons for allowing this. Yagumam was not past the age of child-bearing, but she had two sons and so had already contributed to the strength of the clan into which she had married. A woman who had not yet borne sons would have been given promptly to a new husband. Secondly, it was well known that Yagumam was a vigorous and independent person who had killed another woman in a fight, and they hesitated to give her to a man who already had wives with whom she might disagree.

I have been concerned in this book with some of the more dramatic aspects of the women's behaviour: their protests at marriage, their rebellions against the authority of their menfolk, and the fate of 'wandering women'. The protests at marriage are usual. Even if a girl has not developed an attachment to a youth she cannot marry, she tries to prolong her period of adolescent freedom. There are two ways of stating in the Kuma's language that a girl marries: she 'goes to' a particular man, or he and his clan 'take' her. The first expression implies that she has chosen a particular man who is willing to accept her as his wife, and that both her relatives and his are agreeable to the match. This is most unusual. It is much more common for a girl to be 'taken' (i.e., captured) by the clansmen of a man who has formally betrothed her.

A girl who is 'taken' makes many attempts to escape from the marriage that has been arranged for her. She runs away to her parents; she tries to hurl herself into the river; she seeks the protection of her mother's brother; she runs away to a lover. Her new husband and his clansmen guard her jealously and try to prevent her from escaping. The bridegroom makes rough attempts to consummate the marriage in order that she may bear him a child and so be forced to stay with him. Children in Kuma society belong to their father and add to the strength of his clan, so a woman who has children cannot leave her husband without deserting her children.

I have related how the woman named Man tried to make her husband discard his new wife and was herself discarded. An established wife is expected to try to get rid of a new co-wife. Thus Man told her husband, Kubun, that she had attacked Yere because the other woman had told her not to tolerate the newcomer. The only kind of new co-wife a woman welcomes is one she can regard as a sister or a daughter—normally someone from her own clan of origin. Amp-Damba was acceptable to Mai and Kunig because she was their daughter by adoption.

A woman cannot drive away a new co-wife without the help of at least one other woman. Manamp's co-wife had her mother to support her, but it is unusual for widowed mothers to live with their married daughters. Tai's various wives joined forces to drive away new women he acquired. Non's wife, Onim, was one of many Konumbuga women who had married into Kugika clan, and whenever her husband brought home a new wife she enlisted the help of her clanswomen to drive away the newcomer.

The worst that can be said of a women of the Kuma is that she is a 'wandering woman' (*amp wabure*). The stereotype is a harlot who wanders from man to man, from clan to clan, without ever settling down to raise children and gardens and pigs. Women who conform to this stereotype are rare. I met only two actual 'wandering women', Kolyai and one other, and I received accounts of about half a dozen, including Tolmag. Various people referred to both Manamp and Muru as 'wanderers', for they could only explain the behaviour of these women in terms of such a stereotype.

The Kuma interpret women's behaviour in terms of two extremes, 'wandering women' and 'good women' (*amp duma*). 'Good women' are nearly as rare as 'wandering women'. A 'good woman' is one who consistently obeys her husband and never quarrels with other women. When someone makes a complaint to her, she refers the matter to her husband and lets him deal with it. This requires a measure of self-control that is lacking in most of the Kuma women. One woman greets another with a flood of abuse, accusing her of negligence in letting her pigs enter other people's gardens. If the second is a 'good woman', she turns on her heel, disdaining to answer, and goes to find her husband. But more commonly she takes this opportunity to shout back loud complaints that the injured woman's husband should have fenced the garden if he did not want pigs to ravage it. The pigs are her concern, and she resents the charge of negligence.

Wamdi's wife, Kaing, was a 'good woman', subservient to her husband. She never participated in women's quarrels, but quietly tended her gardens and her pigs and cared tenderly for her little son. Konumbuga by birth, she managed to serve the interests of both her husband and her brothers. In helping to force the girl Gele to go to the Konumbuga, Kaing was helping her own clan of origin to gain a bride and she was also helping her husband's clan to implement the

arrangements they had made. The only other violent behaviour I saw her display was the assistance she gave the other Kugika women in restraining her young clanswoman Pin from running away. Here again she was helping to enforce the marriage arrangements her menfolk had made.

Tai's senior wife, Mai, and Ka's young wife, Yuamp, were the only other 'good women' among the Kugika wives.

'Women are nothing,' the men of the Kuma say. Women play no part in political life, and when the men were obsessed with warfare in the days before pacification women had no role in this important activity. Women play no part in the complicated exchanges between clans, excepting the passive part of being exchanged along with pigs and plumes and shells. Women play no part in the spectacular Pig Ceremonial: they watch the dances from the edge of the ceremonial ground and unobtrusively cook food for feasts. But they are discontented with the subordinate role the men assign to them.

Male-dominated societies are common in Melanesia, but the standard accounts do not tell us how the women react to their treatment by the men. 'Compulsory marriage was resented by the women even in the old days', Mrs Hilde Thurnwald wrote of the people of Bougainville in 1934 (1934: p.146).<sup>2</sup> In former times, 'a girl who was not willing to submit to her father's arrangements was flogged or fastened to a tree and allowed to stand in the full blast of the sun's rays for hours'. But most accounts of primitive societies seem to imply that women submit uncomplainingly to the arrangements the men make for them.

Kidnapping a person on the high road, as Yuaga kidnapped Nimbil, then dragging her over jagged fences to a place where she could be imprisoned under guard, would seem to people reared in our own society an unwarranted interference with personal liberty. Nimbil's family could have reported the kidnapping to a Government officer, and she would have been restored to them with little trouble. But they recognized Yuaga's claim to compensation for his brother's death, despite the edict that such claims relating to happenings before the advent of the Government should be forgotten, and agreed that he could keep the girl in lieu of payment in pigs and plumes and shells.

We can predict some of the changes that would come about if Kuma marriage depended upon the consent of both parties, as it would have to if all were to enjoy freedom and justice. The age of marriage for females (now 13 to 17) would rise: girls would wait until their breasts had dropped before going to men of their own choosing. Some women would never marry, and there would be more bachelors. Polygyny would disappear, for no girl goes willingly to a man who is already

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<sup>2</sup> See Thurnwald, Hilde 1934. 'Women's status in Buin society', *Oceania*, 5: 145-170.

married. Actual and clan sister exchange would no longer be possible, for men could not dispose of their sisters with a view to gaining brides for themselves. Men could no longer use women to satisfy their obligations to each other.

Perhaps the most serious consequences would be the men's inability to enforce their ideas of reciprocity between clans. Marriage is essentially an exchange of women between clans, and the system would break down if the completion of each transaction were left to the will of individual women. Further, the circulation of valuables in betrothal and marriage payments would be upset: a man would no longer be able to establish his right to marry a particular woman by presenting her relatives with a handsome betrothal payment, and a bride's clan would have no means of exacting a marriage payment from her bridegroom. The granting of a simple human right would have endless complications.

If liberty and equality are among the values an independent, self-governing Papua-New Guinea will attain, the women of the Kuma will in time be able to choose their own partners in marriage in their own time. They will marry men of their own choice when they feel like marrying, instead of being forced prematurely into uncongenial and hostile relationships with men selected by relatives whose motives are mercenary. This would seem to be the granting of a fundamental human right. But anyone who reads this book must realize that granting this right involves not merely the dispersal of ignorance and ill will but also the dissolution of Kuma society. If men are no longer dominant, and women no longer submissive, the male ego will have to be reconstituted so that the integrity of men does not depend upon exchanges of women, pigs, and wealth.

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