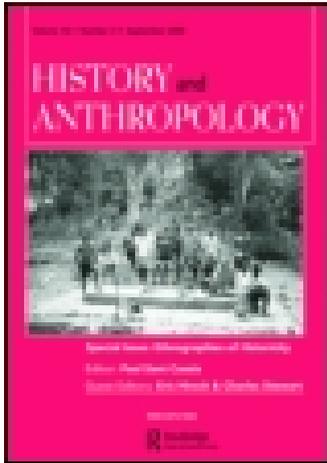


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Mother Scorpion: Women's Politics and Affinal Relations among the Miskitu and other "Brideservice Societies"

Mark Jamieson

This article is concerned with modelling the logic of social processes and cultural representations that inform "politics and gender in simple societies" (Collier and Rosaldo 1981), and considers the well-known ideal type presented by Collier and Rosaldo in which particular gendered practices and ideas are organized around a style of marriage commonly termed "brideservice". These authors' modelling of the cultural logic of so-called "brideservice societies" provides in many ways a satisfyingly coherent analysis of this institution that offers considerable predictive power, but it remains in some respects a partial account neglecting important aspects of older women's political motivations and representations and the role of these women in the context of corporate groups. I consider here ethnographic materials from the Miskitu of eastern Nicaragua, amongst whom brideservice is widely practiced, to highlight some limitations with Collier and Rosaldo's ideal type, arguing that their model should be modified to accommodate these limitations.

Keywords: Brideservice; Kinship; Marriage; Miskitu; Nicaragua

Dowry, bridewealth and brideservice are commonly identified by anthropologists as constituting three particularly common ways in which transactions or payments come to legitimate marriages.¹ The differences between these are generally characterized in the following terms. Marriages organized around dowry payments generally focus on goods given to the bride as a form of pre-mortem inheritance by her own group, though these are empirically often regarded as payments to the groom's group, while bridewealth and brideservice in contrast focus on payments made by the groom and his kin to the bride's

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group (Goody 1973; Tambiah 1973). The distinction between bridewealth and bride-service has commonly been cast in terms of a distinction between gifts of either goods or labour (Goody 1973: 1). Goods given to the bride's group constitute bridewealth, while labour performed by the groom for these affines is termed brideservice. The former, the gift of goods, is characteristic of societies with movable property such as cattle which can serve as a means of payment (Goody 1973: 11), while the latter, labour, is generally given by those without it, most notably but not exclusively in foraging and hunter-horticulturalist societies (Collier and Rosaldo 1981).

One problem with the distinction between bridewealth and brideservice cast as such is that in many societies the groom's labour for his affines is often accompanied by gifts of goods and vice versa, thus making the distinction between the two hard to sustain in empirical terms.² A second problem comes from the fact that the directional traffic of gifts (either of "things" or of labour) from groom to affines is broadly speaking understood to be the same. Put simply, grooms give to affines in both bridewealth and bride-service contexts: goods in one, labour in the other. Assuming that it is purely the distinction between gifts and services that matters, it becomes, however, impossible to account for an ethnographic record that demonstrates important variations in terms both of kinds of obligation and entitlement, and of distinct styles of politics and gender representations, that one finds between societies typically described as emphasizing either bridewealth or brideservice.

Collier and Rosaldo (1981: 278–280), focusing on marriage payments and "politics in simple societies" (hunter-gatherer and hunter-horticulturalist groups), cast the distinction between brideservice and bridewealth in a theoretically more satisfying way.³ For these authors it is not the *kinds* of prestation—goods or labour—moving from groom to affines that determine whether these forms of legitimating marriages should be classed as respectively bridewealth or brideservice, but rather, the logic of obligation that affinal prestations in general engender. Bridewealth, the authors argue, is best understood as goods given by the groom for payment to affines to legitimate his marriage that are *made available to him by his own group*. The services of the bride are transferred to the groom's kin group through a process that substantially alienates her from her own group and legitimates control by the groom's group over her labour and sexuality. These become property of the groom's own group who will engage in litigation with the bride's kin if the bride abandons the groom. The groom's creditors are thus typically the senior male members of his own group. It is these people who bank-roll the marriage of their junior kinsmen, and it is to them that the groom is indebted, possibly for the rest of his life (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 278–281; see also Collier 1988).⁴

Brideservice prestations (often labour but sometimes meat and other goods), on the other hand, do not constitute payment as such for rights over brides, but are made by young men to persuade others that they have wives in the first place and are therefore social adults. In these societies adult status is given only to those males with spouses and the importance of having a wife cannot be overestimated. Young men in these societies are most especially keen to persuade senior affines or potential affines (parents-in-law and brothers-in-law) of this, since these are precisely the people who are most likely to

influence the women they hope to marry or stay married to. Typically, the quest to find and hold onto a wife in societies of this kind, as opposed to the situation in bridewealth societies, is very much *a matter for the individual*. The groom's kin are not involved in his schemes for getting a wife and his subsequent attentions, as far as his marriage is concerned, are not focused vertically on debts to his senior kinfolk but horizontally on his affines, often most especially his parents-in-law and his brothers-in-law. Summarizing in terms of Collier and Rosaldo's revised distinction, the two institutions, bridewealth and brideservice, although superficially rather similar in that they involve transfers from groom to groom's kin, are in fact entirely different in so far as the former is regarded as the lifelong transfer at marriage of rights over persons, while in the latter these transactions are essentially calls for recognition of adult status.⁵

Brideservice, as Collier and Rosaldo describe this institution (or constellation of institutions) is typically found among hunter-gatherers and hunter-horticulturalists, and much is made of the autonomous character of social relations in groups of these kinds, as well as (for some authors, though not for Collier and Rosaldo) the "fact" of gender equality (Collier 1988: 30). However, while it is true that both young men and young women, for example, are by and large allowed to exercise a considerable amount of freedom in comparison to their equivalents in bridewealth (and dowry) societies, both typically engage in social processes that are at once produce, and are reproduced by, a possibly surprisingly asymmetrical politics of gender.⁶ I turn now to ideal-typic manifestations of this.

As Collier and Rosaldo (1983: 283–289) note, young men in brideservice societies are only adults by virtue of the fact that others recognize that they have wives. They consequently need to defend their claims to women (in some instances making claims to the women of others). They do this by adopting, and projecting onto others, what Fried (1967: 79) has termed a "don't fool with me stance", often resulting in stand-off truces with competitors that are represented as masculine harmony. Thus, for example, they advertise their ability to defend themselves with demonstrations of prowess at work and in hunting, since it is these activities that produce goods in the form of meat which they can give to others, particularly affines (who often demand temporary or long-term uxorilocal postnuptial residence from them) who can validate their adult status through recognition.

Young women, on the other hand, have no need of spouses, since brothers and lovers will provide them with meat and sex, respectively. It is only the demands of childbirth, pressure from parents and brothers who want sons-in-law and brothers-in-law respectively, and the representation of unmarried women as dangerous threats to social order, in so far as they are able to generate rivalries between men and disrupt the perceived masculine harmony referred to above, that ensures that they eventually discard their lovers and become wives. As such, women in brideservice societies have little to gain from establishing marriages and are not consequently represented as socially creative. Rather, in contrast to men, they are characterized as quarrelsome, selfish and prone to create conflict.

I do not have space here to do full justice to Collier and Rosaldo's characterization of brideservice, but I have tried here to capture what I believe is essential to their

understanding of the social and cultural logic of this institution. In thinking about the ethnography I have collected during nine periods of fieldwork among the Miskitu of Kakabila (two long-term) and one period of fieldwork among the Ulwa, where in both cases conjugal unions are legitimated over time through brideservice, I continue to be impressed by the logic and predictive power of their model. I do, however, feel that there are some important aspects of the logic of brideservice which find ethnographic expression among the Miskitu and, I believe, other peoples, that are neglected by Collier and Rosaldo, and that these shed further light in terms of explanation on this form of marriage. These aspects of that logic, social processes and cultural representations associated with affinity and gender, should, I argue here, be incorporated into an expanded version of Collier and Rosaldo's ideal typical model, and would give it at once enhanced explanatory power and greater potential to predict further aspects of the kind of sociality they so impressively describe.

In thinking about the motivations of females Collier and Rosaldo (1981: 283–289) focus most closely on younger women, specifically those who are yet to acquire spouses and those who use sexual intercourse politically to threaten the social adulthood of those men who make claims to them (claims that legitimate their status as socially adult men), doing so in order to exercise a degree of control or influence over their “would-be” spouses or to advertise their freedom from conjugal obligations.⁷ It is these actions of younger females (or their capacity for this), according to the authors, that motivate people in brideservice societies to emphasize representations of women not as “fertile mothers” or “sources of all life” but instead as the “sexy partners” of men (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 275–276, 301–302). However the authors have comparatively little to say about the actions and representations of *older women*. They do note that “most women, like men, build adult networks of support and hope in old age to enjoy considerable influence vis-à-vis their children” and that “marriage may actually involve an exchange of sons between old women (who are thus able to enjoy considerable power)” (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 295); but they do not pursue these observations and seem more concerned to make the claim that, because men present themselves as instigators of marriages willing to fight over women, their motivations and spaces for political action are the more significant. The possibility that these “adult networks of support” of women may exert considerable influence is neither factored into their analysis, nor made to constitute any part of the ideal typical framework they devise.

Kakabila and the Spectre of Mother Scorpion

In my experience of life in brideservice societies in Lower Central America older women with shared interests often act together, less perhaps as corporate groups or Houses (which imply some degree of institutionalization) but certainly as moral persons with memberships who share common intentions and desires.⁸ Among the Miskitu of Kakabila on Nicaragua's isolated Caribbean shore, among whom I have been conducting intensive fieldwork for the last eighteen years, the notion of older women acting together as moral persons finds exceptionally coherent expression both in practice and in local representations.

Kakabila is a small village with some 850 inhabitants living in ninety houses on a high bank situated on the western shore of Pearl Lagoon. The villagers, most of whom speak and identify as Miskitu, subsist by growing sweet cassava and other cultigens in small plots of land and earn money by gill net fishing, selling their catches to entrepreneurs located elsewhere around the lagoon. Most houses in Kakabila are minimally inhabited by a conjugal partnership and its offspring, though many also contain widowed parents, sons-in-law, grandchildren, or long-term visitors. These houses are generally located both conceptually and physically in clusters, the consequences of particular histories of uxori-local postnuptial residence. Within these clusters, most women are consanguineally related and count themselves as *taya* or *family*.⁹ Although *family* membership is reckoned cognatically, usually about as far as *second cousin* (a category recognized in Kakabila), the moral and statistical norms of uxori-local postnuptial residence and village exogamy in fact tend to produce a privileging of matrilineal, even matrilineal, relatedness which belies this cognatic ideology.¹⁰

The predominance of uxori-local post-marital residence means that many Kakabila women spend much if not of all their lives surrounded by maternal grandmothers, mothers, sisters, matrilineal aunts, female matrilineal cross cousins, daughters, matrilineal nieces and daughters' daughters. These groups of matrilineally related women constitute the cores of village moral persons which I call "confederacies of sisters" the members of which, recruited by the processes of birth and nurture, constitute networks of generalized reciprocal exchange (see also Jamieson 2008, 2010). Co-members of the group provide one another with support, typically sending one another fish and *bread-kind* (horticultural produce) if required, as well as sharing caring responsibilities towards children and elderly kin in crisis situations. Although these *family*-based networks of generalized reciprocal exchange are sometimes extended to include neighbours who are not matrilineally related, they rarely do so as a matter of course (Jamieson 2003). More often, unrelated women are viewed as constituent members of other "confederacies of sisters" with whom relations may well be uneasy (Jamieson 2008, 2010).

The significance of this consanguineal relatedness among women in Kakabila is nicely encoded in the story frequently told, with minor variations of the origins of the village. In a typical version of this story, it is said that two men originally founded Kakabila more than a hundred years ago.¹¹ One of these men was Silvester Joseph; the other was Cristobal Vega. Vega had several daughters, one of whom, Angeline, became Silvester Joseph's wife. The other daughters, Claudine, Pelina, Matilda and Prida, married outsiders who settled in the village, and became in time the grandmothers of the oldest people living in the village when I first heard this story in 1992 and 1993. The people of Kakabila are thus descended from this set of sisters, the daughters of Cristobal Vega and his wife.¹² This representation of Kakabila's founding is interesting in that it presents a model of the village as at once having constituting a single moral person (still an ideal [Jamieson 2003]), while at the same time offering a segmentary account of why Kakabila is actually now composed of several confederacies of sisters rather than one. Each of Vega's daughters, collectively at first constituting a single confederacy, becomes the founder through the processes of fission of a separate confederacy, each of which is

represented by groups of women whose members count themselves as *taya* or *family* in the present-day village. For Kakabila people this story seems to encapsulate an important political truth: that while men create affinal dyads of mutual recognition through marriage (for example, Cristobal Vega with Silvester Joseph as son-in-law and father-in-law), the confederacy of sisters is at least equally significant and is perhaps fundamentally more important.

The significance of the kin group of related women as moral person is also represented in a Miskitu myth reported separately by early twentieth-century ethnographers Heath, Mueller and Conzemius. As Heath (1950: 34) writes, Yapti Misri is “the goddess of the realm of the dead, *yaptimisri kontri*. She is considered to be the mother of all Miskitos and is described as having innumerable breasts.” Mueller (1932: 32) less informatively describes her as being one of the primal ancestors of the Miskitus, while Conzemius (1932: 159–160) more helpfully writes that Yapti Misri as “a very tall, stout woman with many breasts ... a sort of personified hereafter and heretofore” who receives the dead into the underworld.¹³ As with the story of Cristobal Vega’s daughter’s role in the populating of Kakabila, these accounts of Yapti Misri, I believe, capture the important Miskitu “truth” that it is the confederacy of sisters, the moral person inhabited by matrilineally related older women represented in Mother Scorpion’s hundreds of breasts, that is crucially responsible for important aspects of social reproduction.

Mother Scorpion’s Work

Marriage among the Miskitu of Kakabila is ideally uxorilocal to begin with bride and groom living together at the bride’s parental home, and matrilocal thereafter, the groom building his own house close to that of his parents-in-law. Marriages are also ideally exogamous, certainly in terms of the *family* or *taya* group and the *taya*’s political instantiation the “confederacy of sisters”, and ideally, as far as many villagers are concerned, in terms of the village. Many parents prefer their daughters to marry men from outside the village, at least those who demonstrate commitment (*man’s brains*), because *outside man* (those from other places) are more anxious to be accommodated (euphemistically expressed in terms of their having *manners*). Village *home boy* (young men from Kakabila), on the other hand, have consanguinally related allies on hand who may offer them succour and support, and they are therefore likely to be *rude* or *ruk* (both terms meaning “badly behaved”), as evidenced in Bam Bam’s history presented below.¹⁴

After marriage, men tend to consider their relations with others in terms of social asymmetry, certainly with the members of the confederacies of sisters into which they marry, and possibly, if they are from other villages, with the villagers of Kakabila as a whole.¹⁵ They also see their affinal relations in individualistic terms (at least as far as their own positioning is concerned), and their relations with other men in essentially dyadic terms (Jamieson 2000). After they take wives (*maia*) few have a great deal to do with the confederacies into which they were born, and each in effect occupies a default position of isolation, imagining the relations generated with other men and members

of his wives' confederacies in terms of such affinal pairings as brother-in-law/brother-in-law (mutually *waiikat*), son-in-law/father-in-law (mutually *dapna*) and sister's daughter's husband/wife's mother's brother (mutually *swikat*). Thus positioned, many men, particularly younger men (*wahma*), experience themselves as social isolates rather insecurely articulated to these affines, particularly the members of the consanguinally constituted groups of women of which their wives are members.

New sons-in-law and in-marrying brothers-in-law are viewed suspiciously by host confederacies of sisters because, as Kakabila women say, "*waitna ba setan*" ("man is satan"), particularly young men (Jamieson 2001). In village discourses, this means that they spend their money on drinking rum (instead of on their wives, children and, perhaps, mothers-in-law), getting into rows and fights (all too often with their affines).¹⁶ Women are consequently faced with the possibility of having to domesticate in-marrying grooms. If a groom is indeed *rude*, it is the mother-in-law (*mula yapti*) in particular who does this work because, of all the members of the bride's confederacy, it is she, as her mother, who may bring influence to bear over him by threatening to withdraw her daughter's services from him, and since sons-in-law (*dapna*) are strongly enjoined to demonstrate both *respect* (*rispik munaia*) and *shame* (*swira*) to their mothers-in-law (Jamieson 2000), there is little the former can do in terms of offering resistance. Mothers-in-law are thus supremely well positioned to exercise at least influence, and often control, over their wives' husbands.

This influence, exercised by the Miskitu mother-in-law over her son-in-law, has frequently been commented upon by visitors to the region, as is shown in the following observations by an early twentieth century German Moravian missionary.

After his marriage his good wife and energetic mother-in-law saw to it that temptation would not overcome him. The mother-in-law in an Indian household was a person of great influence, who often ruled the house with an iron hand, even in the days when she was not allowed to be seen with her son-in-law. This mother-in-law of Yulu might have addressed her son-in-law somewhat after this fashion, "Simon, do not forget that you married a Christian girl! If you attempt to run out of the house now to share in the wild carousels of the unfaithful ones at Christmas, when the throat of the parson is still hoarse from singing at your wedding, you will get a good thrashing! There are still plenty of sticks lying about for the purpose." (Mueller 1932: 107–108)

Two mid-nineteenth-century British visitors to the region summarize the position of these groups of older women perfectly.

This custom [the practices of brideservice and uxori-local postnuptial residence] has a great influence in softening the manners of the men, and places the ladies in a very commanding position; indeed daughters are at a premium, instead of being at a discount, as with the other savage tribes. (Pim and Seemann 1869: 306–307; author's clarification in square brackets)

Mother Scorpion at Work—A Case History

I now wish to present a case history that demonstrates the significance of the actions of groups of older women for understanding both the politics of brideservice in Kakabila and the stories of Cristobal Vega and Mother Scorpion.

Sibella was married to a rather quiet man called George, who was respected throughout the village for his sobriety and for his ability to provide for their ten children. When I first arrived in Kakabila in 1992 the other residents of their house were their son-in-law Bam Bam (aged twenty-three); two daughters, Becky (aged twenty) and Katy (aged twelve); six sons (aged between two and ten); and Becky and Bam Bam's toddler children, a boy and a girl. Their house, one of the largest in Kakabila, was situated in the *downtown* part of the village.

Talking to other villagers, I learned that some years previously, Becky had eloped with Bam Bam to live virilocally with his parents in their house *uptown* at the other end of the village.¹⁷ This interested me because it went against the stated norms and usual practice in Kakabila. When parents give a man *permission* to *court* a daughter, it is usually given on the understanding that should the relationship become a conjugal partnership, postnuptial residence will be uxorilocal.¹⁸ Bam Bam had not received *permission* from Sibella and George and he certainly had no intention of moving in with them. Sibella had been furious about the elopement and had reprimanded Becky for acting so foolishly. Since she (Becky) had made her decision without parental consent, she would not be allowed to return home. In other words she was disowned by her mother (Sibella) for her wilful disobedience.

Subsequently Becky gave birth to a son and then to a daughter, but she was not happy in Bam Bam's parents' house where it was said she was bullied both by Bam Bam's mother and her classificatory sisters-in-law, Bam Bam's maternal aunts, all of whom lived close by. In an attempt to forestall the developing problems between Becky and his kinswomen, Bam Bam built a temporary and rather ramshackle house next door into which he, Becky and the two babies moved. However, things did not improve for Becky. Away from his father who sometimes beat him up for drinking, Bam Bam spent even more money on rum, sometimes coming home drunk and beating her. Finally Becky had enough. She patched things up with her mother by admitting her mistake and, while Bam Bam was out fishing, came back to her parental home bringing her babies with her. Bam Bam eventually capitulated and by the time I came to Kakabila, had ingratiated himself sufficiently to be living in Becky's parents' house as a reluctantly accepted son-in-law (*dapna*).

Bam Bam's relationship with Sibella was generally conducted with the tokens of *respect* befitting a mother-in-law/son-in-law relationship (see also Jamieson 2000: 313–315) but this concealed a bitter tussle for control over Becky which they both privately and separately acknowledged to me. One of the most bitterly contested issues was Bam Bam's right to beat Becky. Bam Bam occasionally hit Becky and this really rankled with Sibella. It is generally argued by both men and women in Kakabila that a man has the right to beat his conjugal partner, but whether this right can be exercised while she is living in her parents' house is considered a moot point.

Shortly after my arrival in Kakabila, Becky had become pregnant again. She gave birth to a baby boy and entered into the nine days of post-partum seclusion required of Kakabila women. On the tenth day she emerged onto the house veranda with the baby, an act which provoked an incident. Many Kakabila people believe that a mother and baby should not come out of the house too soon after a birth because of the risk of

the baby catching *fresh cold* (a head cold, also called in this context *bibi kauhla*—literally “baby cold”) and subsequently dying.¹⁹ According to Katy, Becky’s younger sister, Bam Bam at once began to hit Becky for bringing the baby out of doors. Katy ran to fetch her mother and Sibella came running back to the house to demand an explanation. Bam Bam told his mother-in-law that he had not really been hitting Becky. He had only been banging her head against the wooden house wall to knock some sense into her. Giving me his side of the story later, he told me that he had been angry at Becky for risking the baby’s health by bringing it out so soon, though of course technically the nine days had elapsed. He worked hard for his children, he told me, but was too poor to buy medicine for a sick baby.

In Kakabila the birth of a third baby, often marks the occasion for a co-resident son-in-law to move out of his parents-in-laws’ house into a new house built next to theirs. Up to this point, Bam Bam had not even started construction of his house, despite the fact that along with several other men he had been a fairly recent recipient of materials given on credit by an NGO especially for this purpose. According to Sibella, in the row that followed his assault upon Becky, Bam Bam demonstrated a lack of *respect* by telling her, his mother-in-law, that he would never build his house next to hers. It was this, she told me later, which now prompted her to banish him from her house. Bam Bam left in disgrace and Becky along with her children stayed. In trying later to make sense of the course of events up to this point later, Bam Bam expressly told me that he felt that his relationship with his mother-in-law was bad because she tried to control Becky too much. Becky was *his* woman, he told me. It was up to him to decide what she did and did not do. He added that he was always respectful to his mother-in-law, but made it very clear to me that he thought she should relinquish her rights over Becky.²⁰

After two months of exile, George, Becky’s father, agreed to let Bam Bam come back into the house on condition that he changed his ways and, to begin with, Bam Bam made an effort to reform, trying hard to be a model son-in-law. He told me that he was going to give up drinking and would save his money. He would give some to his mother-in-law (Sibella), and the rest would be spent on Becky and their three children. He began to *rip lumber* (extract timber) in the forest with the village sawyer and, with the help of George (his father-in-law) and an adolescent brother-in-law, began to build a house right next to that of his parents-in-law. It was common knowledge in the village, that it had been Bam Bam’s assertion that he would never build his house next to Sibella’s that which provoked her to throw him out of her house in the first place, so the appearance of the frame for Bam Bam’s new house generated some interest. As one of my informants (Sibella’s half sister Albertina) pointed out to me, this capitulation over the location of the new house was a sure sign that now Becky was now in charge, evidence indeed, she remarked, that “woman has more power” (“*mairin kau pauwa brisa*”).²¹

Before long, however, Bam Bam began to slip back into his old ways, drinking, and allegedly stealing money from Sibella. The money he earned from fishing and selling turtle meat which should have been spent completing the new house, was spent on rum, and the house frame that had so quickly been erected during the period in which he had attempted to turn over a new leaf, became a climbing frame for the *downtown*

children, and was never fitted with either plank walls or zinc roof. Tension between Bam Bam and Sibella began to mount again, and she began to mutter to her closest friends that she might have to send Becky away, partly to get her out of Bam Bam's reach and partly to knock some sense into her.

The Christmas season came to Kakabila, and two of Sibella's sisters arrived to spend the holiday season with their parents. These sisters, Witi and Gloria had married Spanish-speakers (*panya* or *ispail*) and now lived on the Pacific side of Nicaragua. They had become much hispanicized, and were regarded as being very sophisticated by other village women. As their visit drew towards a close it was decided by Sibella's mother, father and sisters, that two of her younger *tiara* (adolescent female) sisters, Mic Mic and Telia, would go with them. It was thought that some time spent on the Pacific coast would be beneficial to the two girls. They would learn better Spanish and become, like their elder sisters, more *experience* (worldly wise). This plan to send the girls was public knowledge in the village. Unknown to Bam Bam, Sibella was also planning to spirit Becky away with them.

While Bam Bam was at sea, hunting turtle with George, Sibella's sisters left Kakabila for Managua. With them went Becky and her youngest baby. Bam Bam returned to the village after a week at sea and was taken by complete surprise. He told me later that he had been totally unprepared for this turn of events and had been quite devastated.

In spite of the fact that Becky had gone to Managua, Bam Bam remained as a resident in Sibella's house, continuing to regard himself her son-in-law and therefore responsible for his two older children, who remained in Sibella's care. He repeatedly questioned his father-in-law (*dapna*), about whether Becky would be coming back to Kakabila, and if so, when. George told him that she would be coming back at some point, going on to imply that the time would depend on his behaviour and, presumably, on his continuing to work for his parents-in-law. When I returned to Kakabila four years later in 1997 Becky had returned and was now living with Bam Bam in a house situated only yards from her mother's.

Discussion

What does this case history tell us about brideservice and Collier and Rosaldo's (1981) thesis? Dean (1995) is, in my view, correct to suggest that anthropologists need to give much greater prominence to the actions of women in brideservice societies if the logic of political processes and gender identities found in these societies are to be properly understood, and his focus on young unmarried women and sororal co-wives in the context of the case study he presents succeeds in doing precisely this. However, this criticism cannot be levelled at Collier and Rosaldo, since their ideal type is in part predicated on the observation that women in brideservice societies have a considerable degree of autonomy and the freedom, within limits, to take lovers and subvert the aspirations of men. My purpose in this article to show that certainly in the context of the Kakabila Miskitu, and apparently in many brideservice societies, older women, acting together as moral persons, are significant and important in terms of the both social

processes that their presence engenders and the ways in which men and women are imagined.

For men like George and Bam Bam whose status as respected adult men (*waitna almuk*) is based on maintaining harmonious relations or *living good* (*pain iwaia*) with actual or potential affines, the possibilities for conducting hostilities either alone or in concert in brideservice societies, are typically limited. Mindful both of the likely consequences of upsetting their affines and possibly losing their wives (as Bam Bam did), and of the importance people in these societies place on affinally focused quietude by men (no doubt in part a function of the “don’t fool with me” stance identified by Fried [1967: 79] and highlighted by Collier and Rosaldo [1981: 290–291]), younger men have to be careful to show that they are *serious* individuals ready for the challenges imposed upon them by the assumption of adulthood. Older women, however, have little to lose by alienating their in-laws, and thereby operate without constraints that might prevent them from acting forcefully against their younger kinswomen’s husbands and lovers. Thus, in the case history presented above, Sibella was both able to banish Bam Bam from her house, and conspire with her sisters to send Becky to Managua. The brave, even foolish decision to live as a young woman among a confederacy of sisters of whom one is not a member, perhaps as an eloping bride, is not an attractive option. Thus Becky, at the beginning of her relationship with Bam Bam, quickly found herself quite unable to live with his mother and maternal aunts who treated her as an outsider and allegedly bullied her. Groups of adult women, acting as moral persons in brideservice societies, thus at once discourage virilocal postnuptial residence, while at the same time enforcing the subordination of young in-marriage males. Given that mothers exercise the greatest control over the group’s junior female members, it is hardly surprising that this subordination of young men, anxious to obtain and, crucially, maintain wives, is expressed in terms of the extreme respect or avoidance directed towards mothers-in-law widely reported for brideservice societies.²²

Women, unlike Kakabila men, have little need to create the rather anxious affinal alliances that constitute the focus of men’s political actions and the basis of their personhood. Instead, their actions and notions of being “women” fall out of their being members of groups of related females for whom maturity brings influence both over daughters and other junior kinswomen, and, through their daughters, over suitors, sons-in-law and other junior male affines. Older men such as George in the case history presented earlier, even in their maturity, remain in many instances as affines outside the confederacies of which their wives may be influential members, and may even retain the anxiety of being outsiders experienced more acutely by younger men (see also Kerns 1983). Operating under quite different sets of socially constructed constraints, men and women of mature age thus tend to organize their politically motivated actions quite differently, with women having far greater licence to indulge in affinal politicking.²³

Conclusion

It is not my intention here to dismiss out of hand Collier and Rosaldo’s understanding of the sociological and cultural corollaries of brideservice. Indeed my appreciation of

their insights has progressively deepened as I have come to familiarize myself with the Miskitu and their neighbours the Ulwa (who also practise brideservice). However, in neglecting the actions and representations of older women as described here for the Miskitu of Kakabila, they have missed an important aspect of its workings. In failing to account for the role of groups of adult women as moral persons—whether acting in dramatic fashion together with confederates as among the Miskitu, or more quietly but equally effectively in smaller groups or even alone as may be the case in other groups—they have, I believe, neglected (a) materials that demonstrate that older women in brideservice societies exercise considerable influence over younger men, (b) practices that fall out of this social logic such as mother-in-law avoidance and (c) representations of women that encode this relation, such as that of Mother Scorpion.²⁴

Collier and Rosaldo's ideal type focused primarily on ethnographic materials from the !Kung, the Murngin and the Ilongot, among whom Rosaldo conducted fieldwork. The political significance of the mother-in-law and son-in-law relationship is clearly significant among the !Kung, where marriages are often arranged by parents, where sons-in-law are clearly subordinate to their wives' mothers, and where avoidance is generally significant (e.g. Marshall 1976: 249, 267; Lee 1984: 75, 83, 85). Mother-in-law avoidance and the politicking of groups of affinal older women is also reported for the Murngin and related groups (Warner 1937: 101, 103, 116, 132, 562–564; Kaberry 1939: 182–184; and Burbank 1994). Interestingly, however, Rosaldo (1980) does not mention this aspect of social life for the Ilongot. I do not believe that this was an omission. Rather, it seems as though the Ilongot themselves focus much more on the practice and representations of headhunting among men in enacting affinal politics, and that their variety of the constellation of practices, beliefs and representations surrounding brideservice, quite untypically for those societies supposedly represented by their model, are considerably more focused on men and the potential for violence than they are on women, as is the case among the Miskitu and probably the !Kung and the Murngin. Interestingly it is, as the authors note, Rosaldo's work that was "central to the development of our model of how brideservice societies work" (Collier and Rosaldo (1981: 281).

Brideservice societies of course differ from one another, and might be understood to represent transformations of one another in respect to the political processes described by Collier and Rosaldo. In selecting the Ilongot as a key exemplar for these processes, I believe that the authors inadvertently chose a rather marked case that served their purpose in some, but not all, respects. Of course, it may be that this analysis of the Miskitu of Kakabila similarly represents a lopsided exemplar of a brideservice society, but perhaps in offering us further basis for comparison, it provides us with an opportunity to produce a modified or expanded ideal type that might encompass brideservice societies not otherwise easily represented by their model.

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Notes

- [1] Goody (1973: 1) also mentions gift exchange sister exchange, token payments and the absence of exchange as other categories.
- [2] Goody (1973: 14–17) acknowledges this, most especially for matrilineal bridewealth societies where cattle-keeping tends to be absent or less significant and where rights to a woman and her children remain to a considerable extent in the hands of her mother's or mother's brother's group. Goody's attention to differences in contexts of this kind come very close to Collier and Rosaldo's characterization of what makes brideservice distinct from bridewealth, as discussed below. See also Tambiah (1973: 84–85) on uxori-local postnuptial residence in dowry societies. Meillassoux (1975), anticipating Wolf's classic *Europe and the People without History* (1982), contains an interesting discussion of rights over spouses and children in bridewealth societies in terms of Marxist relations of production.
- [3] Collier (1988: 15–70) contains a restatement of this important and innovative distinction.
- [4] This "logic of obligation" is most starkly represented in the notion of "cattle-linked siblings" among the Lovedu (Krige and Krige 1943).
- [5] I do not have space here to consider the characterization of the politics of gender in bridewealth societies (though see Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 278–279; and especially Collier 1988: 71–196), being principally concerned with brideservice societies; those groups among which marriages are crucially organized around the insinuation of the groom into the bride's group's good graces.
- [6] Rubin (1975) provides an early programmatic statement for approaches that acknowledge this. See also Leacock (1978, 1981).
- [7] Dean (1995) contains useful discussion of this aspect of brideservice and an interesting case study from the Urarina of Peru.
- [8] Kerns (1983) and Burbank (1994) offer particularly rich ethnographic accounts of groups of women acting in this way.
- [9] Those born or raised in Kakabila are fluent in both Miskitu and Mosquito Coast Creole English, a variety of the language related to Belizean and Jamaican English. The English word *family* as it is used in Kakabila is always applied to consanguineal kin and never to affines. Spouses (*maia*), for example, are never described as being members of the same *family* (see also Bell (1989: 86). Local terms in Miskitu and Mosquito Coast Creole English are presented here in italics.
- [10] I do not intend to imply that there is an ideology of matriliney in Kakabila. Nevertheless, a cumulative "matrifiliation" to borrow Barnes' (1962: 6) notion of "patrifiliation", engendered by histories of uxori-local postnuptial residence repeated over generations, undoubtedly accounts for the character of networks of cooperation and identity in Kakabila. This matrilineally skewed nature of relatedness in Kakabila finds expression in the assertion that people from the same *family* are related through breast-feeding. Family members are thus said to be *tiala kakma kumi wina* ("from one nipple"). Riviere (1993: 509, 511) raises interesting and important issues with respect to the concept of descent and matriliney among lowland South American peoples, particularly with reference to Crocker (1979) and Lea (1986). I fully endorse his caveats with regard to the assertions of these authors but do not wish in the context of this article to enter this particular debate, focused as it is on Amerindian forms of sociality. I should add, however, that I do not feel comfortable with Lea's (1992) use of the

- term “House”, which she applies to Mebengokre Kayapó groups, for the rather similarly recruited groups among the Miskitu, since the matrilineally recruited “confederations of sisters” in Kakabila to which I refer have almost nothing in the way of formal group identity or patrimony. Neither am I entirely comfortable with Dean’s (1995) term “matriline” for the Miskitu for the reasons presented by Riviere (1993).
- [11] In fact Kakabila is older than this version of the story suggests and may well have been founded at some time in the second half of the eighteenth century. See Jamieson (1996: 140–141) for a discussion of the evidence.
- [12] Helms (1971: 57–58) reports a very similar story for the origin of Asang, a riverine Miskitu village on the Río Coco to the north: “The nucleus of the village formed around five daughters (one of whom was adopted) and two sons of a Miskito man surnamed Bobb.”
- [13] Evidence for the persistence of these beliefs appears in a piece by Miskitu authors Molina and Boden (1996: 16–17).
- [14] See Jamieson (2000) for further discussion of this.
- [15] This is quite evident from the way affinal terminology is used by and towards in-marrying men (Jamieson 1998: 723–727).
- [16] See Jamieson (2000: 315–320; 2003: 216–217) for further discussion.
- [17] Kakabila is conceptually divided into three barrios: *uptown*, *middletown* and *downtown*.
- [18] I have discussed parental impotence in trying to enforce the notion that daughters and sons-in-law should seek permission at length elsewhere (Jamieson 2001).
- [19] A newborn baby is also spiritually vulnerable and mothers frequently place open Bibles by their babies in the postpartum period to ward off *lasa* (bad spirits).
- [20] Bam Bam moved into the house of his maternal grandparents who also lived with two adult daughters, one son-in-law and several grandchildren in the *uptown* part of the village.
- [21] The political significance of uxorilocal postnuptial residence is acknowledged in the following myth reported nearly a century ago for the Mayangna (Northern Sumu), neighbours of the Miskitu. “Some hours after leaving Yalok, we caught sight of Kakausa and her “son-in-law”. Kakausa is an active volcano, but there was no sign of activity when we passed. The “Son-in-Law”, a much smaller, conical hill, looks much more like a volcano than does old Kakausa. These mountains too are said to have originally been houses. The “Son-in-law”, as all good Indians should, had built his house close to his wife’s mother’s; but one day Kakausa became very angry with the young man, because he had made chocolate and not given her a share; and a fierce quarrel ensued, in which Kakausa’s house was set on fire. This was the origin of the frequent but harmless eruptions” (Heath 1990 [1915]).
- [22] It is interesting to note that despite the large number of societies in which mother-in-law avoidance is practised (Murdock 1949: 270), a large proportion of which feature brideservice in some form, how little attention has been given to this phenomenon in theoretical terms. Hiatt (1984) is an interesting exception that emphasizes psycho-dynamic factors. Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 135–137) offers a political account with similarities to the one offered here, but, unlike Collier and Rosaldo’s model, Radcliffe’s Brown’s “terseness of expression” (Hiatt 1984: 184) gives us little guidance as to how it might be potentially incorporated into an overarching account of gender and social processes in the societies where it appears. See Merlan *et al.* (1997) for a critique of Hiatt’s account and a suggestion that Collier and Rosaldo’s model might be used to explain mother-in-law avoidance.
- [23] See Burbank (1994) for some interesting analysis along similar lines.
- [24] Early ethnographers of the Miskitu and their neighbours the Sumu also interpret mother-in-law avoidance as a refraction of the politics of affinity. “Among the heathen, a man and his mother-in-law must not speak to one another, and according to the strictest usage must not see one another” (Heath 1927: 85).

“MOTHER-IN-LAW TABOO. As soon as the marriage ceremony has taken place the young Sumu husband must not speak any more to his mother-in-law, nor even look at her. When he

is at home she remains in her own apartment, which is separated from the remainder of the house by a partition of bark cloth or imported calico. After he has left she comes out and follows her usual occupations. Upon his return he must give warning by striking the boat with the paddle or pole before proceeding to the hut, and she retires immediately to her own apartment. When she returns from the plantation or from fishing she must likewise give notice, and he walks away for a few minutes, until she has reached her quarters. Should the two meet unexpectedly she will quickly throw a cloth over her head, and he will pass on, turning his face away from her. Should, however, he purposely look at her, or fail to give the prescribed warning upon his return, she will consider this an insult for which she will demand payment through a third person.

This custom appears to exist among all the Sumu subtribes; it is also found among the Miskito of the upper Río Coco, who are largely mixed with the Sumu, but it has not been observed in other parts of the the Mosquito Coast. The origin of this custom is somewhat obscure, and I was unable to obtain from the Indians any satisfactory explanation regarding it. The usual answer is that they observe it because it has been handed down to them by their ancestors. According to Grossman [1917: 4], each mother stands under the special protection of the tapir, who is angry at the man who has robbed her of her daughter, and only refrains from punishing him on condition that he never looks on her. Therefore the man who has looked on his mother-in-law is fated to meet his death from the enraged tapir, unless absolved by making a payment to the wronged women." (Conzemius 1932: 147–148)

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