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Traditional Marriage Among the Wassisi

Introduction

Wassisi is the local name of the land on which the present mission station is built. It is now used to cover the people who live in the surrounding area. The following paper is a summary description of marriage customs in the six villages nearest the mission station. They are Binare, Walngo, Suli, Morte, Mesu and Mai. Wassisi is 17 miles north west of Nuku, the government administrative centre for this part of the West Sepik Province. My chief informant was Dominic Misan; others were Philip Sowei, Peter Pii, Herman Kaukau and Michael Wouwou. They come from three different villages but represent two different languages.

The people of Wassisi believe in a creator god who once existed completely on his own. He, Tawa, is the source of all things and is responsible for their present order. According to local tradition, the people used to worship reverence and fear Tawa as *papa* (father), but somewhere in the distant past, their attention shifted from Tawa as their protector and source of well being, to the spirits of their dead fathers and grandfathers, (*papa tumbuna*). This is the strongest and most central belief of the people here. They say: "My own dead father is with me and looks after me wherever I go. He gives me strength and protects me. He helps me in hunting, in fighting, in gardening, in sickness."

Two of these dead ancestors originally discovered the customs of marriage and handed them down to the people of today. "Wilnba and Sombru did it this way and we follow the same."

Arrangement of Marriage

All marriages were arranged. Most were arranged by the father of the boy with a family in the right relationship with his own family. That is, the girl's family had to be from the line of the father's own mother (the boy's grandmother's brothers). A girl born into such a family relationship *(kandere)* was a suitable person, whereas a girl

from the blood brothers of the boy's mother, i.e., first cousins, was considered too closely related for marriage.

When the right girl was born, the father of the boy, deciding that this was to be the future wife for his son, would arrange the marriage with the girl's father. Having gained approval from the girl's family, he would prepare special foods—young coconuts, sago, banana, greens and various kinds of meat (pig, possum, bush rat or wallaby). He would then take this food to the house of the mother and baby. Additional gifts of a bracelet or necklace of shell ring *(ring tambu)* would also be offered. He would place this gift around the baby girl's wrist (or sometimes the neck) to mark this girl as belonging to his son. This bracelet implied a "hands off" claim on the girl. The father then gave the food to the mother. This then sealed the promise, for the word given and accepted was thus made secure through the giving of food. The food was meant to give strength to the mother, so that she in turn could provide good healthy milk for the baby. Thus, the future wife of the man's son would have a good start in life and become strong. What follows is an account of marriage practices as described to me by my informants.

During Childhood

More food was brought by the father in the weeks and months following the arrangement of marriage. Typical provisions included large betel nuts, yams and *mami* (two root crops), and large bananas. At this stage, food trees, belonging to the father of the boy were marked for the girl—coconut, betel nut, and pandanus palms, breadfruit and ton trees. Whenever the boy's family shot meat such as pig or cassowary, it was given to the girl and her family. Occasionally the girl's family had to bring food to the boy's family. A pig (or pigs) was given to the boy's father, so that he could look after it on behalf of his future daughter-in-law. When it was full grown, it was eaten by the girl and her family.

Once the girl was marked with the shell bracelet *(ring)*, she belonged to that boy and could not change her mind and select another. In the past this did occasionally happen.

If the promise was broken, a big fight usually ensued. Then, once things were calm, all the food that had been brought since the beginning would have to be repaid in kind or paid for with money.

If it happened that as the girl grew, she showed that she did not like the man marked for her, or if she played around with someone else, then she would be given some magic potion (*marila*—love charm potion). Usually some meat shot by the future husband or father-in-law was taken, magic was worked on it, and it was then given to the girl to eat. She was unaware of the magic performed, but her dislike for the man would change to liking him.

Some marriages were arranged when the children were older (10-12 years), but it was mostly if the children marked had died, or if no person was born in the right family relationship.

As the boy and girl grew up, they were not to meet or mix. The boy must avoid the girl. The girl would go to the boy's family occasionally so that they could study her conduct and work ability. She already calls them her "in-laws" *(tambu)*. She too would assess the boy. During this time the boy would not eat meat in front of the girl. His mother would hide meat underneath the greens when the girl was not looking. If she happened to see him eating meat on his own, she would think that later when they were married, he would not share with her the meat he has hunted, and so she would be disinclined to marry him.

Payment of Brideprice

When the girl had her first menstrual period she was cut off from the community by being shut in a special room of her parent's house. Sometimes a special house was built. She was joined by a few younger children as companions, but she stayed there for up to 6 months. This was her period of initiation; it was concluded by a big ceremonial washing during which time, the brideprice for her marriage was paid and the marriage contract between the families was solemnly accepted and sealed. This was the central feature of the marriage customs.

The father of the girl arranged with the father of the boy as to when the "washing" ceremony would be held. This was determined by whether enough food was ready, and whether sufficient meat had been hunted.

The family of the boy, on the day before the ceremony, prepared the brideprice. All the uncles, cousins and relatives brought their shell money to the boy's father who arranged and tied it all on a long branch of a croton shrub. Each person in the girl's family was counted and each was apportioned some shell money. The girl's father received the biggest amount, and correspondingly the boy's father contributed the largest amount.

Next morning, the money and all the food was carried to the girl's village. The shell money was displayed outside the door of the girl's house, and all the food was arranged in a line on the ground. The food was placed on top of split coconut fronds. The women of the girl's family brought out the food they had prepared, and spread it out opposite the frond from the boy's clan. There were two lots of food—one to be exchanged and eaten immediately, the other to be taken back to the respective villages of the two families.

The first lot of food, which was all set out on plates and trays made from cane, was exchanged between the two clans. Besides

the meat, sago and greens, considerable amounts of betel nut and tobacco were also exchanged. When the eating was over, the boy's relatives obtained a certain leaf, put it around the girls wrist and pulled her out of the house.

She was placed in the middle of two lines of her relatives, *(kandere)*. There she was ceremoniously washed, in order to purge her of all the filth and badness (physical, moral and spiritual) connected with menstruation *(rausim doti bilong meri)*. After water from bamboos was poured over her, she was slapped and rubbed with stinging nettles *(salat)*. They rubbed her vigorously with the nettles (her skin would swell up) and then splashed her again with more water. They did this so as to strengthen her for work, to exorcise the spirits, and to cleanse her from all the filth. (She had not washed for 6 months).

Her future husband then rubbed her head with coconut oil, mixed with croton and other scented leaves (purpur). When she had been rubbed all over she shone with all the oil and grease. Her family adorned her with all the family finery. Many shells were hung on her, Bird-of-Paradise feathers *(kumul)* on her head, woven bands and bracelets of cane and vine *(paspas)* on her legs and arms, and a new grass-seed skirt *(purpur)* made by her mother. Now she looked and smelt beautiful.

The boy, the future husband, was mainly an onlooker during these proceedings, as was his family. Their betel nut, lime (cooked the day before by the respective parents) and mustard plant were given by each family to the boy and girl. They both ate and chewed. Meanwhile a banana leaf was placed on the ground in front of them. The girl spat onto the leaf, and the boy spat on top of the girl's spittle. The people say this ceremony was similar to the calling of the marriage banns in Christian churches. Names were called announcing the intended marriage and here the boy and girl announced in this ceremony: "We are going to be married now".

The father of the boy then went to the croton branch on which all the money was tied. He told of himself and his clan, and of the shell money—how much there was, how good it was, who gave what, and so on. He talked about the new alliance which was being formed now by this marriage, about how well he had raised and cared for the boy and about how he and his family would look after the girl. There would be no fighting or quarreling in future.

The girl's father looked at the shell money and he told of how he had raised and cared for the daughter, and how the new clan into which she was going to be incorporated, must do likewise. If he thought the shell money was not adequate he would say so at this point.

There was quite an exchange in words and stories by both fathers, but other leading relatives and big men from the villages also contributed. Eventually when all the speeches were concluded, and

agreement reached on how good both families were and would be, the boy's father gave all the shell money to the girl's father. He took his share and dispensed the rest to each relative who was to receive payment. "This is your payment," he announced to each, "come and take it".

The food remaining on the ground was then exchanged. This included all food that was uncooked, meat that had been smoked and dried, sago, root crops of yam, mami, taro, etc. There were special types of meat for the women relatives — fish, frogs, lizards, small rats and birds—and other ("better") meat for the men, i.e. big birds, pig, possum and cassowary. The boy's clan took its food and returned to its village. The members of the girl's clan took their food into their respective houses.

Periods of immediate engagement and assessment

The girl now visited between her own parents' home and that of the boy's parents. They judged her ability to work and her other qualities. They also assessed the boy—the girl's parents also took an interest in this. The boy had to demonstrate strength, maturity and growth. He had to kill a pig or cassowary, to work a garden, and to build a house. He had to shave, to have hair under his arms and on his chest. The testing and assessing was severe, because the parents required that the two must be truly capable of looking after themselves, future children and visitors. The parents decided when the two were strong and mature enough, and this usually took a long time. The two were not allowed to be together at all during this period. When the time was judged right, the girl's parents arranged and announced the occasion for the final transfer of their daughter. This transfer would always coincide with some other singsing or festival. Other marriages which were to be celebrated could also be arranged for the same time.

Final Ceremony

When the particular singsing was to take place (in whatever village in the immediate area), the clan of the boy prepared him for the last stage of the marriage process by decorating him with the mark or sign of adulthood.

On the evening of the singsing, his male relatives took him to the men's house where they tied up his hair. They used fibres of bark

or vine, and made a circle about 4 inches in diameter around the top of his head, tying the fibre securely to his hair. They then took a flat section of the bark of some tree (*laplap bilong kokonas*—coconut tree tissue) and rolled it around into a cylindrical shape about 4-6 inches high. This bark or tissue is placed around the fibre circle on his head and fastened to it. Feathers of the white cockatoo were then inserted around the outside of the bark. The people called this "the hat of an adult man". Other decorations of beads, shells, bracelets, feathers, leaves and paints are placed on his body. A new longer sheath of bamboo was put on his penis; this sheath replaced the small one he had been wearing since puberty. It was tied at the top end by a string around his waist and placed across the top of his leg. He was also given large quantities of food.

When all was ready he was brought outside where the assembled clan clapped hands as a sign of recognition that there was a new adult man in the village. He was paraded around for all to see and admire. At the place of the singsing the young man was joined by a friend: they were literally tied together for the night. Croton leaves are put on both left and right arms and the left of the new adult was fastened to the right of his friend. Both held bow and arrows in their hands. When they came out to dance and sing, the future wife joined her husband and danced close at his heels. She did not leave him all night.

People who saw him with his new bark hat and with the girl behind him declared that these two were now almost completely married *(klosatu bai marit olgeta)*. At dawn when the dancing ended, the girl went with her husband, either to his family or to her own family. They ate together then for the first time. After the *singsing* was over, the girl went back to the boy's village to live there as a new member of his clan. She was now the wife of this man, but they could not live as husband and wife until the final ceremony had taken place.

After a few days, when the finery of the *singsing* (leaves) had dried up, the father of the boy instructed him to go and take his wife to the bush. He says, *"Katim purpur nau"* ("cut grass skirt now"). From this time they could actually live as husband and wife. Before departing for the bush, the girl prepared and cooked sago for her husband, and in front of her in-laws, gave him his food. The taboo on eating food cooked by the girl was thus ended. He and she ate together, publicly, a sign that they are truly married.

They could now go around together. They worked together in the garden, washed sago, walked together, ate together and lived in their own house, (or in a separate section of his parents' house if the man had not yet built his own). She now walked around completely naked—the sign of the married woman. Taboos concerning food and meat were no longer in force.

Postscript

None of these customs are practised today by the people of the Wassisi area. They dropped them all when they came into contact with the European culture introduced by the missionaries, government officers, recruiters and Melanesians from other areas of Papua New Guinea.

The people are now interested in re-introducing some of the customs again.