BRIDEPRICE AND PREJUDICE: AN AUDIO-VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY ON MARRIAGE AND MODERNITY IN MT HAGEN, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between bridewealth and women's autonomy is not only discussed amongst anthropologists, development practitioners and other scholars but also amongst the brides themselves. Women continue to embrace such marital exchanges, despite their knowledge of 'modern' development discourse about the constraints of the practice on women's status and its links to gender-based violence. This paper provides a visual exploration of contemporary brideprice practices and women's autonomy in Mt Hagen. We draw on scenes from our ethnographic film (*An Extraordinary Wedding*: *Marriage and Modernity in Highlands PNG*) to explore deliberations and developments that occurred in the case of a particular marriage that took place in 2012. We argue that the institution of brideprice has the potential to enhance the visibility of some women and the importance of their contribution to their own and husband's kin groups. Despite current tensions regarding brideprice, it can serve as an avenue for the enhancement of women's political participation. The particular brideprice exchange featured in our film, raised concerns for the participants, which we consider in terms of three questions: Does brideprice commodify women? Does it play a role in gender-based violence? Is it inimical to aspirations for modernist individuality? We discuss the importance of *bekim* ('return gift') and suggest that this practice challenges the notion of brideprice as a commodity transaction. We argue that, while there may be an association between brideprice and

gender-based violence, brideprice, in and of itself, is not causative of violence. The marriage represented in the film, and discussed in this paper, reveals the creativity of participants in adjusting the values inherent in the customary practice of brideprice to their contemporary aspirations.

KEY WORDS: brideprice, ethnographic film, marriage, gender based violence, Papua New Guinea

There has been a long and continuing debate among anthropologists, Christian missionaries, development practitioners and other commentators (eg. Galbraith 2011) concerning the relationship between marital exchanges and women's status (and value) in Oceania (Jolly 2015; Jolly et al 2012; Macintyre 2011)[i]. More recently, the discussion has escalated, with particular emphasis on the issue of links between brideprice and gender based violence (Biersack and Mcintyre 2016; Eves 2019). According to the Human Rights Watch Report, by Heather Barr (2015), 'Tensions over bride price are sometimes the trigger for violence, or make a survivor's natal family less likely to offer support…the families may not want or be able to repay the bride price, and pressure them to stay with their abusive husband'. The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against women, Rashida Manjoo, reported similarly after her country mission to Papua New Guinea (2012:6).

However, it is not only outside observers who have been engaged in such analysis, as Jolly (2015:63) points out with regard to *ni* Vanuatu debates about *braed praes* and Macintyre (2011) describes for Papua New Guinea. In Papua New Guinea, brideprice has long been a matter of intense debate. Colin Filer (1985) analysed a sequence of letters to the editor of the English language newspaper, the *Post Courier*, back in 1979 - 1980. The diversity of viewpoints in this correspondence revealed brideprice (over 30 years ago now) to

have been a rich discursive tool for the expression of numerous conflicting concerns about the relationship between 'Custom, Capital, and Gender' (Filer 1985:165) among urban dwelling, educated Papua New Guineans, and it remains so today.

In this paper, like Filer, and numerous other anthropologists who have focused on changing marriage practices in PNG (eg. Macintyre 2011; Rosi and Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993; Spark 2011; Sykes 2017; Wardlow 2006; Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993), we consider how some Papua New Guineans grapple with ideas and practices regarding brideprice, in the light of the negative evaluations afforded to such practices in 'modern' development discourse. How do brideprice participants themselves navigate a discourse based on binary oppositions between persons and things, gifts and commodities, 'between women as agents of benign customary practices and women as victim of commoditisation, violence and invented traditions' (Jolly 2015:64)?

Anthropologists tend to prefer the term 'bridewealth' over 'brideprice', in order to avoid the connotation that the practice involves the purchase of a woman as a commodity, as Valerio Valeri (1994:3) has also observed. In this paper, we use the term brideprice rather than bridewealth, not to flag that it has become a commodifying practice, or to identify the practice as a commercial transaction, but simply because it is phonologically, if not semantically, the same as the name given to the marital transaction in Tok Pisin – *braid prais* (where *prais* translates as 'prize' (as in 'to give a prize') or 'gift'; see Mihalic 1986 [1971]: 160). However, it must be noted that although Hageners refer to the institution a whole as *braid prais*, the term specifically refers to the payment that the groom's group presents to the bride's group, exclusive of other marital exchanges that comprise the different stages of the brideprice transaction overall.

Our ethnographic focus is on the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea and, in particular, a brideprice exchange near Mt Hagen that took place in December 2012, and about which we have made a film. We entitled the film *An Extraordinary Wedding* in recognition of the fact that several of the participants referred to it as such. In our recent account of the film making process (Henry and Vávrová 2016) we note that it was considered extraordinary for a number of reasons. It was extraordinary to many of the participants not only because of the 'elite' identity of the bride and groom, who are the tertiary educated offspring of 'mixed marriages'[ii] between high profile families, but also because of innovations on the way the brideprice was conducted and distributed. As one of the groom's clansmen, explains:

> This is a traditional obligation…but giving it to the bride and the bridegroom are something unique … I think, this is first time that we've done it. And I think it's…an example that the people of Western Highlands might have to look at it and take it onto themselves... I like it in a way because you get the Leahy family, the Wilson family, and the Penambis and the Mogeis kind of, you know, they joined up together to come up with the situation like this…*out of extraordinary*. (from *An Extraordinary Wedding*)

AN EXTRAORDINARY WEDDING

The brideprice documented in the film was attended by the first author, Rosita Henry, as an invited childhood friend of Maggie Wilson, the mother of the bride, who had passed away three years earlier (Henry 2012). Maggie was the daughter of Jara, a woman from the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea, and Patrick Leahy, older brother of Michael and Daniel Leahy, who were among the first Australian explorers to enter the Highlands. However, Maggie grew up in the Highlands as the daughter of her mother's husband Kuan, and a member of his clan group, the Penambi Wia. She was sent to high school in Australia by her uncle Daniel Leahy, but after graduating she returned to the Highlands, married an Englishman, Keith Wilson, and brought him to live with her on her Penambi Wia clan land,

where they raised their children. Thus, the Wilson children grew up as members of their mother's patriclan (Penambi Wia) and have been assimilated into the clan as agnates, evidencing the 'well known ability of Highlanders to absorb non-agnates – and even non-"kinsmen" – into "agnatic groupings"' (Merlan and Rumsey 1991:43) and the 'rapid "conversion" of the status of co-resident matrifiliates into one equivalent to people whose affiliation is based on a paternal tie' (Merlan and Rumsey 1991:70).

The brideprice was originally filmed as a private 'wedding video' for the bride and groom. However, during the process of filming, Rosita's anthropological lens came to the fore and, even more strongly, after she began to edit the film footage with Daniela Vávrová (Henry and Vávrová 2016). Thus, this paper is an audio-visual ethnography in the sense that it emerged out of the very process of recording the events and editing the footage. It was especially during the process of editing, in collaboration with some of the participants, that we began to more fully understand the ethnographic complexity of brideprice as it is practiced today in the Western Highlands. The presence of the camera may have had an influence on comments made as asides by participants to the filmmaker, outside of the main ceremonial proceedings, but it had little effect on the key participant's actions and speeches during the formal brideprice exchanges. As the ceremonial events were recorded unobtrusively from the distant sidelines with just a single video camera, the filming is unlikely to have had much impact. Most of the speeches were given in Tok Pisin or Tok Ples (Melpa and Temboka), with some speakers delivering their speeches twice, first in Tok Pisin and then in Tok Ples for those who could not understand Tok Pisin. It is clear that the speeches were addressed specifically to the local audience, not to the anthropologist, nor the camera.

If she had been alive, the bride's mother, Maggie, would have played a significant part in the marital arrangements of her youngest daughter, Nadia. Instead, Maggie's two older daughters, Bernadine and Olivia, shouldered the responsibility for working with their Penambi Wia kin to arrange matters for their sister Nadia's marriage. They did their very best under the guidance of their mother's brothers but sorely missed Maggie's deep understanding of the protocols and practices of cultural diplomacy required in complex ceremonial gift exchanges between intermarrying clans in the Western Highlands.

Maggie's absence was also keenly felt by her lineage (*haus man*), the Wia Ulgamp Komp, and her wider clan group, the Penambi Wia. Maggie was referred to many times in speeches during the brideprice transaction, not only by participants on the bride's side, the Penambi Wia, but also the groom's side, the Mogei Nambuga. In spite of her absence, Maggie's presence was palpable in the exchange relations that were at play. Her agency clearly extended beyond her life; into a future that she had created through a lifetime of transactions not only with members of her own clan, through her contributions to funerary payments, compensation payments for deaths and injuries, and to the brideprices of her clan brothers, but also with individuals from other clans in the Hagen area, and wider afield, who had supported her in her business ventures or in her election campaigns.

Maggie is well recognised, not only in the Western Highlands but also elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, as having been a strong leader, a *big woman*, who stood twice as a candidate in the national elections. She was a successful entrepreneur who had established several businesses in Hagen, including a tourist lodge in her home village and a hotel in Hagen town. She had even organised a Moka ceremonial exchange, usually the preserve of *big men* (see A. Strathern 1971) with one of the big men of the Mogei Nambuga, and had enmeshed herself in a complex network of exchange relations across the region.

As Maggie was a Penambi Wia clanswoman but also a Leahy who had married an Englishman, Keith Wilson, the marriage of her youngest daughter was billed not just as a marriage between the Penambi Wia and the Mogei Nambuga. Also acknowledged in the transactions were the Wilsons and Leahys. Additionally, relationships on the groom's side were complicated by the fact that the groom too is the product of a 'mixed marriage'. The groom's mother is not from the Western Highlands, but from Enga Province. According to the groom's father, Engan brideprice practices are different from those among Hagen people in that, before a young man's marriage is able to proceed, his maternal kinsmen expect a final payment to be made to them for his birth. Among the Enga, from the time a child is born 'child growth payments (*wane yangi*)' are expected to be made by the father in the child's name to the maternal kin who are considered 'owners of the child (*wane tange*)' (Feil 1984:160). Such 'child growth' payments are also made among Hagen people, but are not required as a precondition of marriage. Thus, the groom's father, Phillip Maipson, had the extra responsibility during the marital exchange of satisfying his son's mother's brothers with a payment of pigs and money – in total 40 pigs and 46,000 kina[iii]: 'It's not the Hagen way, but I had to make them feel happy and acknowledge them. It is their custom, so to keep the brideprice peaceful I had to act as if I were an Engan' (Phillip Maipson, pers. comm. Sep. 2017). Adding further complexity to the transactions was the fact that the groom's father had two wives. The marital exchanges, therefore, also involved the groom's other mother and her kin from Chimbu Province.

This complexity is not particularly unusual in Papua New Guinea today. The increasing mobility of many Papua New Guineans seeking education, work and other opportunities in urban centres, has led to a rising number of marriages across different language groups, sometimes between people who have very different brideprice customs (Macintyre 2011: 109-110; Rosi and Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993). Differences may include the

types and amounts of objects exchanged, the expected timing of exchanges, the particular people who are expected to contribute to the wealth and those who will benefit from its redistribution, and so on (Merlan 1988; M.Strathern 1984) . So called ‘mixed marriages’ can lead to significant tensions as the bride and groom and their extended families try to accommodate the demands of each side arising from different customary practices, in themselves dynamic and changing. Moreover, brideprice is not practiced by all Papua New Guinean societies as Rosi and Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1993:195) note, and even marriages within a particular region, among people of the same language group or related language groups, can involve disputes over many fine points of difference among bridewealth practices and processes (M. Strathern 1972:333). Marilyn Strathern provides an account of regional differences among Melpa speaking people during the 1960s, noting that when marriages take place ‘the theoretical arrangement is for the groom’s kin to follow the customs of the bride’s people’ but that ‘bridewealth negotiations between people from different regions can founder’ (1972:333). The marriage discussed in this paper is between two clans (Mogei Nambuga and Penambi Wia) that have a history of intermarriage and that have very similar customs regarding brideprice. However, as a marriage always draws into play a long genealogy of connections, not only between the intermarrying groups but also between each of those groups and their allies, the groom’s father needed to take into consideration his exchange relationship with his wife’s Engan clansmen.

Although the bride’s father, Keith Wilson, was supportive of his daughter’s choice to have a brideprice marriage, he was concerned about what this would mean for her in terms of her status and the expectations her husband and his family would have of her. He had not given brideprice to marry her mother. Maggie had explained to her clanspeople that brideprice was not customary among the English. Instead, Maggie brought her husband to live with her in her natal village.

Maggie was well versed in 'gender and development' debates about brideprice and the commodification of women. She even presented a paper on the topic in 1986 at the 17th Waigani Seminar published in the volume *The Ethics of Development: Women as Unequal Partners in Development* (Wilson 1987:173-174). She was worried that women were being 'bred for monetary gain and social and political advantage' and argued:

> I am against bride-price because of the unfair pressure it places on women. At the same time, I am all for maintaining tradition…Many women in my area…do not see themselves as being unequal to their men, and rightly so, for they realise the importance of their role, though in many cases it is a tough one. The traditional wife is proud of her ability to be strong, to be a good mother and provider. Isn't it she who attends the pigs which in turn raises her man's status in the tribe? And how many of those powerful words that come from the mouth of the *bigman* have passed through her lips first? She may seem like a passive partner, but isn't she the backbone of society?

Maggie's words reveal the ambivalence she must have felt about brideprice. She was clearly concerned about the implications of the practice and its impact on the lives of women, yet always contributed generously to brideprice transactions for her male kin.

Like her mother, Maggie's eldest daughter, Bernadine, chose not to marry by the tradition of accepting brideprice from the groom. However, her youngest sister Nadia decided that brideprice was important for her marriage, particularly as her intended, Hebrew, was a Western Highlander (a Mogei Nambuga man). Nadia's marriage involved a series of exchanges of wealth items that required commitment, diplomacy in calling in debts and arranging credit, and a lot of hard work on the groom's side to put together the brideprice payment, but also much work on the bride's side to handle the complexities of redistribution of the payment among their group, and to secure enough wealth for the customary counter payment to the groom's group. At the same time, as revealed in the speeches that were given at the wedding, the marriage, raised concerns for some of the key participants about the meaning of the brideprice tradition today, which we frame in this paper in terms of the

following three questions: 1) whether brideprice commodifies women, 2) whether brideprice plays a role in gender-based violence, and 3) whether brideprice is inimical to people's aspirations of modernist individuality. Grappling with these concerns, informed by a their undertandings of the global development debate and 'the combined influences of commodity economics and Christianities' (Jolly 2015:74) on brideprice, some of the participants sought 'extraordinary' ways to innovate on customary practice.

IS BRIDEPRICE A TRANSACTION THAT COMMODIFIES WOMEN?

That brideprice commodifies women is part of a global development discourse sometimes uncritically reproduced in Papua New Guinea. For example, the 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) by State of Papua New Guinea on its implementation of the 2030 Development Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), categorically states that 'traditions such as "bride price" lead to women being treated as property to be traded. These practices are more pervasive in rural settings than urban' (Papua New Guinea, 2020: 36). In denouncing brideprice as a traditional practice that commodifies women, the report ignores links between such commodification and modernity.

Transformations in brideprice in Melanesia have been traced by numerous anthropologists. Brideprice, as practiced today, reflects emergent class differences and inequalities. According to Jolly (2015: 74): 'Increasingly it values not just the worth of a woman's labour, sexuality, fertility, education, and employment, but her origins [her group] (…). This expands the commodity dimensions of brideprice as it becomes more intimately linked to the major circuits of contemporary global capitalism'. Colin Filer's research during the 1980s indicates that a key concern for the Papua New Guineans in question in his study, was the growing influence of money and whether its inclusion as a component of brideprice is transforming the institution. However, the issue was not merely whether brideprice

functions to ‘transform brides themselves into commodities’ (Filer 1985: 171). Rather, there were a number of other questions that concerned them, including ‘whether brideprice is or is not consistent with various aspects of petty bourgeois morality – freedom of contract, romantic love, the happy family and self-control’ and ‘whether it is or is not essential to the preservation of a Melanesian cultural identity’. Ceridwen Spark’s more recent research among Western educated women in PNG, similarly reveals that the main issue for women was not brideprice marriage itself with its perceived ‘commodity dimensions’ but the implications of entering into marriage at all, with or without brideprice. Spark (2011: 165) argues that educated women avoid marriage because ‘they fear that such relationships will destroy their career prospects, compromise their economic and decision-making independence and force them to grapple with male jealousy and violence in the domestic realm’. She also notes, in agreement with Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1995: 121), that educated women are influenced by romantic ideas of companionate marriage and family life in the West.

Margaret Jolly (2015), in sympathy with Valeri (1994), questions the simplistic way the debate about brideprice has been waged in terms of a binary opposition between a gift economy and a commodity economy, when ethnographically ‘we find the co-presence, the mutual constitution, and indeed the intimate imbrication of gifts and commodities, *kastom* and Christianity in marital exchanges’ (Jolly 2015:72). Many anthropologists working in the Pacific have noted that brideprice has increasingly become ‘a commercial transaction…showing every sign of being sensitive to market forces’ (Macintyre 2011:108). Certainly, in the Hagen area, the practice is sensitive to fluctuations in the market value of cash crops and pigs. While shells and once precious oils are no longer exchanged and money has progressively become more important, pigs are still the fulcrum of brideprice exchanges and it is against the availability of pigs and their size that the value of brideprice cash is

largely calculated (see also Wardlow 2006:120[iv]). Pigs are crucial, despite the fact that sheep, cows, chickens and goats have been added to the mix, partly to accommodate the religious denominations that forbid the consumption of pork.

In spite of the impact of the forces of global capitalism, in the Hagen area there continue to be dimensions of brideprice that run counter to the idea that it constitutes women as commodities, such as that it is seen as a matter of collective agency, rather than a transaction between individuals, and that a good proportion of the payments is actually reciprocated by the bride's group within a couple of weeks of receiving the payment.[v] Yet, some Hagen people are concerned, like many others Papua New Guineans, that local understandings of brideprice transactions are changing under conditions of modernity (see Macintyre 2011; Wardlow 2002, 2006).

Certainly, in the case of the brideprice marriage of Nadia, her siblings were worried that the brideprice might be *interpreted* as a commodity transaction and they wanted it to be clear that their sister was not being 'sold'. Thus, they were relieved when the groom's father, Phillip Maipson, a prominent Hagen *bigman* and businessman, emphasised in his speech that brideprice was about building bridges and emphatically denied it was a commodity transaction that reduces women to servants, as some people claim (see Galbraith 2011):

> Now, Nadia and Hebrew are building a bridge. We'll be able to visit each other any time. This is the meaning of the marriage. All the food, pigs, money we are giving, it's not about making Nadia my servant. She won't be washing my clothes or looking after me. Don't take it wrong. The meaning of brideprice is different. Our way of doing things here in PNG, and in Mt. Hagen is different. Most of the people interpret it wrongly. They think that buying a woman gives us the right to beat her. This kind of thinking is wrong and comes from a bad man. Brideprice is about witnessing. Nadia is going to leave you, Penambi. And she will join us, Mogei. She will have children…If Nadia…wants to stay with my family, I will involve her in the community. So, I'm acknowledging this loss for you, Penambi. It's a gain for us, Mogei. We are giving you all this, to show you our appreciation. That's the reason why we are doing this. Don't take it wrong. Nadia won't be cooking for me or washing my clothes. I've

made it clear to all of you. Nadia and Hebrew have their own life to live. (translated from a speech given in Tok Pisin - *An Extraordinary Wedding*)

A few days after the event, the bride's older sister, Bernadine, and two women from the bride's village, a mother and her married daughter, discussed what they thought of the practice of brideprice. Asked whether it was common for men to think that because they had paid brideprice they, therefore, 'owned' their wives, the women insisted that brideprice was 'not like buying rice or tinfish at the store; a few men may think of it that way, but most do not, because they know that brideprice is given to build relationships'. Their comments support many accounts in the ethnographic literature that portray brideprice as part of a series of transactions, including birth and death exchanges, concerning segmentary group politics and the reproduction persons, social relations and social groups (eg. Feil 1981, 1984; Glass 2015; Lederman 1986; Merlan 1988; Merlan and Rumsey 1991; Telban 1998; Strathern, M. 1972, 1984; Wardlow 2006). The women talked of brideprice not as payment for their bodies, but as recompense for the work that their kin had done in growing them as persons. Brideprice is referred to by some women as *pe* in Tok Pisin, and the women talked of their brideprice as *pe bilong mi* which may be translated as 'my price' or 'my pay' (Mihalic 1986 [1971]). 'My pay' suggests an association with the idea of wage labour, but *pe* in this context is more likely related to the concept that persons are formed through the *labour* of nurturance necessary to raise a child to adulthood, which is recognised and rewarded in brideprice transactions. It is important to note here the distinction between 'selling' (*salim* 'to sell') and 'buying' (*baim* 'to buy'). According to Valeri (1994:1), Huaulu men say they 'buy' their wives but they never say that they 'sell' their sisters or daughters and the same applies in the Highlands Papua New Guinea.

Putting together the very large brideprice they wanted to give, which in the end amounted to over 100,000 kina, 60 pigs, 4 goats, 3 cassowaries, 1 sheep, 1 possum and heaps

of vegetable food, meant that the groom's father and his clan brothers had to work very hard. Relative to other 21st century brideprices in the Hagen area, this was a substantial sum. For example, at an 'ordinary' marriage attended by the first author in March 2010, in addition to the usual piles of vegetable foods, the Penambi Wia presented 14,000 kina, 25 pigs and four cassowaries in brideprice. At a marriage attended in September 2017 the clan group presented 24,000 kina, 43 pigs and two cassowaries in brideprice. The brideprice is carefully tallied and remembered. A brideprice is public knowledge and both men and women can be heard afterwards discussing what, and how much, was given, comparing and contrasting it with other brideprices. When prompted, most women readily recount their own brideprices as well as their estimation of the average brideprice at the time of their marriage. This includes elderly women who married during the 1960s when, as A. Strathern and M. Strathern (1969:146) note, amounts varied from 'eight to twenty-four pigs, ten to sixty shells, and c$10 to A$200', and women who married during the 1990s, when '5,000-6,000 kina was a typical current rate, plus several pigs (each worth approximately 500-1000 kina depending on the size)' (Stewart and A. Strathern 1998:138).

In the case of the brideprice featured in *An Extraordinary Wedding*, the groom's father had to call on all the support he could muster from his extended network of kin, allies and exchange partners, including the Enga and Chimbu clans of his co-wives, the grooms' two mothers. The substantial brideprice that was presented on the ceremonial (*sing sing*) ground of the Mogei Nambuga, reflected the prominence of the groom's father, for whom the brideprice was an important means to display his wealth and power, as well as the status of the bride, as Maggie Wilson's daughter, her relationship to the Leahys, and that she was a 'modern', educated woman, with a university degree. Additionally, the bride already had two daughters with the groom, so her brideprice was increased by the presentation of an additional amount in recognition of the two children.

However, the brideprice also put great pressure on the bride's kin. As a woman from the bride's village relayed later, some of the Penambi were very worried about the burden of having to reciprocate a brideprice of that size. 'How are we *ever* going to repay all of this?' they said. Among Hageners, it is customary for the bride's natal group to invite the groom's group to their village soon afterwards, to ceremonially return what is conceptualised as approximately 'half' the amount of the brideprice to the groom's group in what is called the *bekim* ('payback' or 'return gift') in Tok Pisin.

The *bekim* is expected to take place within one to two weeks after the presentation of the brideprice, unless there is a death in the community, in which case the *bekim* is delayed to allow the funeral to take precedence.Thus, the time after the brideprice can be a stressful one for the bride's group as they seek to secure pigs of equivalent size to give to the groom's group. It is important for the pigs returned as part of the bekim not to be the same ones given in the brideprice. It would be a matter of great shame to give back the same pigs. Interestingly, ideally the money too should be different, new notes rather than the original notes given. The core principle is one of *exchange* of substance not return of the same substance.

It was a great relief to the bride's Penambi kin that, mostly due to the efforts of the bride's sister, Bernadine, they managed to organise a generous *bekim* to present to the Mogei, which Bernadine publically announced in her speech during the event:

> I'm very new at making this kind of a speech. It's the first time, but I'm very proud to be doing it. I'm very happy to stand here and very happy that Nadia's married Hebrew…I thank Phillip. I think that Phillip has initiated something new for us in the Western Highlands. Phillip, you gave us 60 pigs. Twelve of them were given to Nadia and Hebrew. Nadia and Hebrew gave away three. There are 45 pigs left. We'll eat 30 pigs and 15 are left. I'm not counting those we killed. Those 15 are nice big pigs. The white pig here, because we are *white* people, we give to Phillip [laughter at her joke]…Seven of the 15 pigs, we are giving you in return. That's on the side of the pigs. On the side of the money, you gave away 100,000 Kina. Thirty thousand you

> gave to Nadia and Hebrew…We are giving you, altogether 38,454 Kina in return. Thank you very much (translated from a speech given in Tok Pisin - *An Extraordinary Wedding*).

Afterwards, Penambi Wia women complimented Bernadine on her achievement, referring to her as a '*wanpela hatpela pikinini*' (a strong, courageous child [of Maggie]).

The practice of *bekim* marks brideprice as a series of transactions between intermarrying groups, rather than a one-off payment for a bride. Marilyn Strathern (1972:101-113) summarises the stages in a brideprice transaction as practiced during the 1960s, noting that some of the stages could be omitted depending on 'the goodwill of the affines-to-be' and 'on their respective wealth' (p.102). Each stage is referred to by a different name. In the Temboka language spoken by the Penambi Wia, the term for the main display and presentation of the wealth by the groom's group to the bride's group is referred to as *amb kwime* (spelt *ab kuime* by Merlan and Rumsey 1991). In Tok Pisin this particular payment or stage is referred to as the *braid prais*. The countergift made by the bride's group about a week later, referred to as the *bekim* in Tok Pisin, is *amb megl ambglek ting* ("woman (bride) things held (in order to give) give") (pers. comm. Bernadine Wilson 21 Aug. 2020). In other words, this part of the brideprice is conceptualised as being just held temporarily by the bride's group, not kept.

The amount returned at a *bekim*, while conceptualised as ideally 'half', varies depending on the particular marriage and the nature of the relationship between the intermarrying groups and in some cases there may be no *bekim* at all. It may be that *bekim* is on the wane in the Hagen area, but this requires further research. At a brideprice transaction in September 2017, 24,000 kina, 43 pigs and two cassowaries were presented by the Penambi Wia groom's group as *braid prais*, but only 6000 kina and 5 pigs were given by the Poi Penambi bride's group as *bekim*, a much lower percentage than was given as *bekim* by the

Penambi Wia to the Mogei Nambuga in the case of Nadia and Hebrew's marriage. As one of the groom's Mogei Nambuga clansmen, Douglas Doa, said during his speech at the *bekim:*

> Thank you all very much. We didn't expect anything like this. Really! We thought… You would give us a bit of money and a pig. Something we just quickly take and return home. Instead, you returned half of the money! We didn't expect you doing that. It's true. I swear to God it's true. Because last time we did brideprice, we had different expectations… thought that this kind of brideprice practice had died out. I'm telling you this from my heart and God is my witness. Actually, it is two beautiful girls and Nadia that Phillip has paid brideprice for. Bernadine, you've succeeded in doing a really big thing with this exchange. It's hard to say anything from our side. We didn't expect that.

The fact that the bride's family placed much store on ensuring they returned a good proportion of the *braid prais* at the *bekim* reflects not just their relative wealth and high status but their concern that the institution of brideprice today is increasingly being interpreted by Papua New Guineans as signifying the 'purchase' of a woman, and that this might place wives at risk of gender based violence. The wealth that was returned at the *bekim* provided a culturally embedded means for the bride's family to try to counter this interpretation. Building up a bride's personal status through the generosity of the *bekim*, is a way that Hageners attempt to protect their daughters and sisters from the scorn of their husband's group and from being labelled and treated as 'rubbish (*korpa*)' (M. Strathern 1972: 118).

IS THERE A CONNECTION BETWEEN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND BRIDEPRICE?

Richard Eves (2019: 1368) notes that inspite of concerns over the risk that brideprice might pose to women, 'a direct association' between the practice and gender-based violence 'is rare'. However, he argues that research reveals an *indirect* association, in that 'brideprice having been paid can constrain women's choices and trap them in an abusive relationship' (Eves 2019: 1368).

Rather than the 'tradition' of brideprice in and of itself, perhaps it is its contemporary *inflation*, and the exhorbitant debts that are incurred by transacting parties that creates the potential for gender-based violence. As Eves (2019) notes 'the inflation of brideprice has negative consequences, including the marginalisation of men who cannot afford to compete' and the creation of debts that must be repaid 'with the burden of earning the money often falling on the woman herself'. Yet, like Cook and Thies (2019), who found 'no robust relationship' between brideprice and political violence, we urge caution in attributing gender-based violence directly either to brideprice or brideprice inflation, when such violence may ultimately be attributable to wider frustrations arising from unmet aspirations in the face of market forces and growing socio-economic inequalities.

That brideprice might indirectly enable violence against women was clearly of concern for Nadia's sisters. As Bernadine put it in her public speech of thanks to the Mogei Nambuga after they had presented the brideprice:

> I just want to say that I'm very happy. I've been thinking a lot. When my mother was still alive, I promised myself not to participate in brideprice. She knew why. I decided this because, when my sisters from the village got married, and they came back because their husbands were beating them, they were sent back because brideprice was paid. But today I'm really very happy. I know that my mother would be happy too. She knew how important brideprice is, and I know it too. (translated from a speech given in Tok Pisin - *An Extraordinary Wedding*)

The concern expressed by Bernadine was not that brideprice itself causes violence, but that the continuing relations of exchange and indebtedness that the transaction creates limits women's options to leave their husbands and escape abusive situations. While the practice of *bekim,* helps to reduce the amount of wealth that a woman's clan is expected to return to her husband's clan, should she later seek a divorce, the difference between the original brideprice and what was returned in *bekim* may still be substantial and her clanspeople may be unable or unwilling to support a divorce.

According to Martha McIntyre (2011) women on Lihir who are wage earners on a mining project and career women working in towns in Papua New Guinea, expressed similar ambivalence about brideprice. Many were opposed to it for its use by men to justify violence against their wives. Yet, during a discussion with a small group of Penambi Wia women the day after Nadia's bridebrice, at which Rosita raised the issue of gender based violence and its association with brideprice, one of the women, a subsistence gardener, responded emphatically '*pe ino blo pait*'. Brideprice, she said, is not about such violence but about making people peaceful and happy. She insisted, even though she herself had been subject to brutal beatings, including with barbed wire, by her now ex-husband, that this had nothing to do with the custom of brideprice. She said her husband was a man who was anyway prone to violence. She argued that brideprice custom is a good thing for a woman in the Highlands because it provides a means for her to contribute to her parents and her wider group in return for the care they had given her growing her up. It brings 'peace, happiness and pride' to her family. On the other hand, she admitted if a woman does not get a *braid prais*, or only a small *braid prais*, she is at risk of becoming the target of gossip and taunting, especially by other women who have married into her husband's group. While she is aware that neither Bernadine nor her mother Maggie were married with *braid prais*, she insisted that ordinarily a woman *must* get *braid prais* as her reputation depends on it. In addition, if her patrikin do not return anything, or return too little at the *bekim*, her husband or other members of his kin group are likely to be *bel hevi* (Tok Pisin for 'resentful') and raise it whenever there is an argument between them. They might say something like: '*Mama blo yu givim pik meri long mipela, na yu tok tok ah*?' (Tok Pisin for 'What gives you the right to talk? Did your mother give us a sow?', by which they mean the exact opposite) (see M. Strathern 1972:118).[vi]

Nevertheless, Penambi women recognise that today there are certain wealthy and powerful business women, such as Maggie, who are able to choose not to marry by the

tradition of accepting *braid prais* from the groom. Such women do not suffer social condemnation, because the expectation is that they will, over time, be able to compensate their clan more than adequately themselves, through their own generous contributions to their natal group and to wider clan interests. One particularly 'strong' Hagen woman who decided to marry without accepting *braid prais* from the groom, but who then turned around and paid her own *braid prais* to her patriline, is much admired among Penambi women. The Penambi women agreed that the patrikin of some women pressure them to stay with violent husbands, as they do not want to have to repay the *braid prais*. Nevertheless, many women choose to leave, even though it might mean giving up their children. One woman recounted that when she left her extremely violent husband, her family willingly paid in compensation 300 kina and a cassowary, which today would be worth about 800 to 1000 kina. Her *braid prais* was actually about 8-9000 kina, but her clan had already returned part of this as *bekim* and her lineage was not required to repay the rest because a child had already been born to the union. Another divorced woman living back in her natal village with her Penambi Wia brother, recounted that there was no expectation from her ex-husband that any of her *braid prais* of 60 pigs and 25,000 kina be returned, but that he had kept their two children. Her marriage had been an arranged marriage and her ex-husband now lives in Port Moresby, while she is building a trade store on her own clan land and also studying part time for a business diploma.

Much of the now global development discourse that associates brideprice with gender based violence, is based on an assumption that brideprice is, or has become, nothing more than a commodity transaction, as Jolly (2015) observes. If a woman is 'purchased', so the argument goes, then she is also at risk of violent attack if she does not satisfy the demands of her husband and members of his kin group, who 'paid' for her (Jolly 2015:64). Yet, if brideprice is understood more holistically as a *series of exchanges*, rather than as a one-off

transaction, then violence is less readily attributable to brideprice in and of itself. Hageners know that the institution of brideprice includes not just a wealth transfer to the bride's kin from the groom's kin, but also a return of wealth at the *bekim*, in addition to a whole series of exchanges that precede and follow these events. Therefore, while divorce leaves a woman vulnerable to losing access to her children, brideprice is not readily interpreted as a transaction that puts her directly at risk of personal violence. Rather it is seen as a practice that protects her from the potential of such violence. On the other hand, there is ambivalence or doubts about the impact of brideprice on women, especially among Western educated people and those who are aware of the feminist critique of brideprice or who may have embraced and internalised Christian missionary opposition to the practice. They worry that perhaps modernity is indeed incompatible with traditional practices, leaving women increasingly vulnerable to retributive acts of violence, such as Spark (2011:167) has described on the basis of her discussions with educated Papua New Guinean women in two urban contexts, one of which was in the highlands (see also Eves 2019).

Nevertheless, brideprice continues to be supported as a social institution by Highlands' women as well as men, even in the face of a prejudicial discourse of modernity that denigrates it and renders it suspect. As a series of exchanges between clan groups, brideprice provides much scope for competitive socio-political manoeuvring to enhance segmentary group status. However, it also offers a platform for strategic power politics by particular individuals, mostly men but also women. It provides an avenue for women to enhance their own autonomy, dignity and respect within their husband's group and among the people with whom they spend their everyday lives and have to rely on for support.

It is not that participants do not recognise that gender based violence is a problem in their communities. Many women have direct experience of such violence and will readily point out the history of scars on their bodies that bear witness to it. Others, who may not have

experienced violence themselves have seen or heard how this woman or that woman was given a black eye or a broken arm or much worse. Nevertheless, in the discussions that the first author had with Penambi Wia women during the time of the brideprice transactions that are the subject of this paper, brideprice was not considered the 'root cause'[vii] of such violence. Their theories of the root cause of gender based violence remain to be further explored. However, an alternative theory expressed by one of the male participants in the film was that, rather than brideprice, it is actually the practice of *arranged* marriage that leads to violence. As the bride's mother's brother,Thomas Las, reflects:

> Nowadays domestic violence is gonna go, I can see that. It's gonna go, because nowadays people are going to school, they are getting educated, boys are having girlfriends, girls are having boyfriends and they say 'I love you'. I love you'. And love also seals a marriage; and once they bring in the word love, the boy, the man can't slap their love… Brideprice is not about buying a woman. Brideprice brings two tribes together and it seals the marriage. (*An Extraordinary Wedding*)

For subsistence farmer, Thomas Las, a brideprice marriage, such as his own marriage, does not exclude the possibility of a love match but, for him, whereas the former signifies tradition, privileging the latter signifies western modernity, to which he aspires.

BRIDEPRICE AND ASPIRATIONS FOR MODERNITY

Biersack and Macintyre (2016: 24, 35) have argued that brideprice 'is the obvious target' for attention of 'the international human rights system' in the 'campaign to mitigate gender violence in the western Pacific'. Indeed, there are many Papua New Guineans themselves who argue, in concert with such human rights discourse, that brideprice should be totally abolished, not only for fostering gender violence, but also as inimical to the social and economic development of the nation and aspirations for western modernity.

Yet, as Marshall Sahlins (2005 [1992]) has argued, PNG perspectives on development are not necessarily only about economic growth and the trappings of modernity, but about 'the enrichment of their own ideas of what mankind is all about', 'their own culture on a

bigger and better scale than they ever had it' (p.24). This includes bigger and better brideprices. Anthropologists (in Robbins and Wardlow 2005) have closely scrutinized Sahlins's concept of 'develop-man' (1992). Some provide ethnographic evidence in support of his 'continuity in change' approach (how, in the face of change people work to maintain and 'develop' their own value systems). However, others focus critically on his theory of the ultimate reason for total 'rupture' in the continuity-in-change process, that is, his suggestion that a necessary stage in the process of modernization is an experience of 'humiliation'. According to Sahlins (2005: 38), in order to 'modernize', people 'must first learn to hate what they already have, what they have always considered their well-being… they have to despise what they are, to hold their own existence in contempt – and want, then, to be someone else'. Applying Sahlins' argument, one could argue that the rejection among western educated Papua New Guineans of the institution of brideprice is an expression of shame or embarrassment about the cultural practices of their ancestors, felt in the context of a desire for 'modernity'. Modernity, as in the case of the marriage that is the focus of this paper, translates as a couple's capacity to arrange their own marriage based on Western concepts of courtship and romance and to be able to set up a neo-local household, relatively independent of the demands of extended kin networks. Brideprice marriage brings with it expectations that there will be continuing exchange relations and obligations long into the future with those who contributed to the brideprice as well as among those to whom it was redistributed. Among Papua New Guineans who rely on paid employment, and who seek to establish neo-local households, whether in PNG itself or transnationally, a brideprice-married couple is under much pressure, as they are drawn into social indebtedness and a moral economy of interdependency that they might value on the one hand, but find oppressive on the other (Sykes 2013, 2017).

Some scholars argue that the opposition of certain women and men to brideprice, and indeed the avoidance of marriage altogether by some individuals, reflects the growth of possessive individualism and desire for money, as much as for a gendered 'modernity' that demands disentanglement from customary networks of relatedness and responsibility (Macintyre 2011; Martin 2007; Rosi and Zimmer-Tamakoshi 1993; Spark 2011; Wardlow 2002). As Macintyre (2011: 207) writes, 'It is the exchanges associated with marriage and bride price, where dramatic changes in attitudes that illuminate ideas about individuality can be observed; and it was about bride price that participants wrote most critically'. However, as Knauft (1997:238) has observed:

> To say that modernist inflections of 'success' or 'progress' are increasingly important to the construction of gender is not to say that these notions replace previous orientations. New ideals of individual acquisitiveness are cross-cut by longstanding values that stress generosity in gift-giving and circumspection in personal consumption.

We argue that this is the case with brideprice marriages in Hagen today. The 'extraordinary' marriage discussed here, where a substantial part of the brideprice was given directly to the bride and groom, reveals how participants try to find creative ways of adjusting custom to their aspirations for modernity. At the same time, values of relatedness continue to be reproduced (Maclean 2010; Stewart and Strathern 2005). However, such reproduction, or cultural continuity, is not automatic and needs to be understood as historically situated (Biersack 2010; Maclean 2010). Neil Maclean (2010), for example, describes a minor bridewealth event among the Maring people of the Western Highlands in order to show how 'the closed and generationally extended cycles of marriage have, in everyday imagination and rhetoric, the national field as their counterpart and reference point'. As Biersack (2010:280) notes, 'Maclean rightly invites anthropologists "to bring an interpretive understanding of the

culturally and historically inflected dynamics of specific sites to transnational and transcultural debates."'

Before giving the brideprice to the bride's group, for the customary redistribution among themselves, the groom's father, Phillip Maipson, publically addressed the couple in his speech, saying:

> All this came in your name. I will sort you out first. All the Penambi will get something, but what will you get? You have two daughters. I will give you 30,000 Kina together with 12 pigs. The pigs are yours now. It's up to you what you want to do with them.

The extraordinariness of paying some of the brideprice directly to the bride and groom was acknowledged by all present, especially those who recognised it as an innovative response to the demands of modernity, the rise of neo-local residence patterns and the growth of possessive individualism (Martin 2007; Sykes 2007a, b).

It had taken the groom's father many years of hard work to build up the respect and capacity required to conduct this brideprice exchange for his eldest son. He had contributed to numerous other brideprices over the years, which had helped grow his network of connections and had created numerous debtors, who he now could expect to contribute to his son's brideprice. Having been educated in Australia, the groom's father is well aware that brideprice is not commonly practiced there and elsewhere in the West, where newlyweds are usually presented with money and other gifts directly to help them start their own lives as couples. In fact, at most marriages in the Hagen area today, the bride and groom are separately gifted by family and friends with household goods, such as cooking utensils, for the their own house. However, the groom's father decided to innovate further by actually presenting a part of the brideprice itself directly to the bride and groom rather than giving the whole amount to the bride's patriline for distribution among themselves, as was done

traditionally. Those who knew that this was the way of Western modernity, were impressed with what Phillip was able to put together as a direct gift for the newlywed couple and some thought that he had excelled in this regard, by beating modernity at its own game. As the bride's uncle, Thomas Las, comments in the final scene of *An Extraordinary Wedding*: 'Societies in the West maybe give something to the newlywed but not as much as 30,000!'[viii]

Nevertheless, it is important to note that while the payment of part of the brideprice directly to the couple was made in recognition of their modern status as an individual unit, neither the couple nor their kin saw this payment as actually freeing the couple from their customary responsibilities towards their broader kinship networks. The expectation was that the couple would quickly redistribute at least some of the pigs and money and that it would work to draw them in and tie them even more closely to the extended network of people who had contributed towards it.

The redirection of brideprice to a couple rather than the bride's clan group could potentially work to afford a woman greater autonomy, in that it constructs her as an agent in a partnership that will put that wealth to work. However, both wife and husband, are bound through the gift even more strongly into the relational system of exchange. Thus, the innovative payment to the couple should not be interpreted as a mere a transformation of brideprice into marriage gifts, nor an acknowledgement of the autonomy of the young couple. Rather, the innovation shifted some of the responsibilities that would otherwise be mostly in the hands of the male members of intermarrying segmentary patriclans into the hands of the couple as a new segmentary unit, counter to any individualist aspirations they might have.

CONCLUSION: GENDERED AUTONOMY

Many of the prejudices about brideprice that circulate globally today are revealed in the case of *An Extraordinary Wedding* which, apart from the fact that some of the brideprice was

given directly to the bride and groom, had a very similar format to other large brideprice events that take place regularly in the Hagen area today, some of which include incorporation of Christian marriage vows. In the case of Nadia and Hebrew, such a marriage ceremony, officiated by Catholic priest Father Garrett Roche, at which the couple exchanged rings, was held on the ceremonial ground of the bride's village the day the groom's clan group arrived for the *bekim*. After the Christian service, the *bekim* proceeded according to custom, except that it was Bernadine, the bride's sister, rather than a male leader, who presented the money and pigs that the bride's group had put together for this counter gift.

While the brideprice discussed in this paper is extraordinary, it is not really exceptional. Today in the Highlands there are many other such transnational 'mixed-race' families, as well as powerful Highlands business men and women, who attempt their own innovations upon brideprice. Philip Maipson, the groom's father, is a relatively wealthy Mogei Nambuga man who calls his own shots. To present part of the brideprice directly to the couple was his decision and a surpise to many on the day, including the Leahy and Wilson families.

In this paper, we have focused on three key issues that relate to women's autonomy, as revealed in the brideprice transactions associated with this particular marriage: the commodification of women, gender-based violence, and the rise of modernist individualism. We have argued against attributing the commodification of women and gender-based violence directly to the institution of brideprice itself, or even indirectly to brideprice inflation. While brideprice inflation has been linked to prestige competition among men, leading to marginalisation of men unable to compete, and potential conflict and violence in marital relationships (Eves 2019:1373), as Stewart and Strathern (1998:139) point out, inflation of brideprice may also partly be an effect of the changing status of women and perhaps even their growing autonomy. They note that payment traditionally given to the

mother of the bride ‘has increased greatly in recent years’, suggesting a greater recognition of ‘the nurturing work of the mother in raising the daughter and a heightened awareness of the kina value of the mother’s work’ and ‘an appreciation of the new roles that women have created for themselves’.

Although the famous large scale ceremonial exchange system known as Moka, has all but disappeared in the Hagen area, brideprice continues to flourish. This has occurred in spite of development and human rights discourse against it, as understood and perhaps internalised by western educated middle class Papua New Guineans, and despite concerns that brideprice might be increasingly operating so as to reduce women to mere commodities. Perhaps brideprice is thriving because, in spite of the introduction of money into the transaction and an extremely high inflation rate, it continues to do the job it has always done – that is, to concretise valued relationships, and draw individual entrepreneurs back into the dynamics of exchange. What Demian (2004:107-108) argues in relation to transactions in children, we suggest, equally applies to the transactions in women that take place in the context of brideprice. Just because women ‘sometimes occupy the position of objects in the course of these transformations should not be construed as meaning that they somehow lack personhood or agency’. Rather, what such transactions illustrate, Demian (2004:108) argues, is ‘the intersubjective capacity of social life’ and ‘the fact that the value of relationships can be altered without being alienated from persons in the first place’. Women may indeed be objectified, but not as commodities. Rather, as ‘women in between’ they are concretised as highly valued pathways or roads for the creation and development of relationships among goups (M. Strathern 1972).

In the Western Highlands, agency is traditionally attributed to men, not women, in intergroup transactions, although, as Merlan (1988: 412) argues, women have ‘a chance of being represented as transactors at the interpersonal level, that is, of having particular

payments attributed to them as their own "idea" and contribution and not to them simply as their husband's partners' (c.f. Lederman 1986; Merlan and Rumsey 1991:62). However, certain exceptional women, such as Maggie and now her daughter Bernadine, are admired for being able to act as transactors beyond the interpersonal level. *An Extraordinary Wedding* provides insights into women's capacity to become transactors in intergroup relations, and to thus challenge the 'woman as producer/man as transactor' model of gendered action in the Highlands (see M. Strathern 1972, 1988). While, the lead role in accepting the brideprice from the Mogei Nambuga (and in the subsequent public redistribution of the bridewealth among the Penambi Wia) was taken by the bride's kins*men*, the bride and her kins*women,* particularly her older sisters, played a strong role in the decisions about how the wealth was to be redistributed. That this was an innovation is highlighted by the fact that the Penambi Wia leader felt obliged to urge his kin to accept the women's decisions:

> Now, we'll share what was given to us... We will redistribute according to Nadia's list. I urge you all to accept that and respect the distribution. Some of you may object to that, but it's not necessary. I urge you all to accept how it is done. (Councillor John Kawa; translated from the Tok Pisin in *An Extraordinary Wedding*)

It is clear that today certain 'strong' Highland women are able to engage publically in intergroup transactions, partly as a result of emergent class differences. What makes them exceptional apart from the force of their characters and their ability to garner support from their families, friends and allies, is their educational qualifications and their capacity to earn a relatively high level of independent income through wage labour, or business acumen. They are thus able to contribute generously in their own name to clan based exchanges and collective endeavours such as brideprice. The institution of brideprice can serve as an avenue to enhance the visibility and influence not only of men but also of such women. As revealed in *An Extraordinary Wedding*, it was not the bride's father but her older sister, who engaged in the transactions on behalf of the bride's group, and she was admired and highly

commended for this by the Mogei Nambuga clansman in his public acceptance speech at the *bekim*.

Thus, *An Extraordinary Wedding* portrays a marriage that was out of the ordinary to many of the participants in many different ways (Henry and Vávrová 2016). The important leadership role that the bride's sister, Bernadine, played in the transactions was one of these ways. Other aspects included the relatively large payments compared with 'ordinary' marriages, in terms of both *braid prais* and *bekim*, and the distinctions between the key participants and their wider clan groups in terms of class and race, educational qualifications, and their relative capacity to acquire wealth. However, perhaps most significantly, the wedding was billed as extraordinary because of how the *braid prais* was presented, with a substantial part of it gifted directly to the bride and groom. Thus, the wedding presents an innovative response to the perceived demands of modernity in Papua New Guinea, and the growth of an imagined community of individualists, with a gendered capacity to autonomously achieve their own life projects.

Yet the very act of presentation to the couple as a separate unit, immediately drew them back into the social responsibilities of relatedness. Through the gift of money and pigs, the couple were re-harnessed into the segmentary group structure as a little subgroup, able to assert a certain autonomy but becoming further enmeshed in the politics of exchange. The groom's father clearly says that it is up to the couple – the bride and groom - to decide what they do with the money. If they want to leave and study in Australia, it is up to them. Nevertheless, the widely understood expectation among participants was that, wherever they choose to live, once the couple establish themselves, they will continue to honour their relational obligations.

The value and meaning of brideprice, which has long been a matter of prejudicial contention among foreign commentators, has also increasingly become a subject of debate among Papua New Guineans, as evidenced by many anthropologists (eg. Eves 2019; Jolly 2015; Macintyre 2011; Spark 2011; and Sykes 2013). *An Extraordinary Wedding* shows that some Hagen people too are aware of the terms of this debate. In search of a better life and in an effort to open up spaces for personal autonomy, they readily attempt to rework customary practices. At the same time, they defend their practices against a discourse of misconceived prejudice propagated by foreigners, but also taken up and internalised among themselves, not so much in resistance to Eurocentric values, but as an alternate to those values. Although debates about brideprice are often framed in terms of tradition versus modernity, all brideprice transactions today in PNG – whether ordinary or extraordinary – are thoroughly contemporary productions, embedded in a national field within a global political economy. The battle against prejudice, is as much against one's own as that of others. Brideprice is valued as a practice because it creates satisfaction through building and maintaining social relationships, but it is also a matter of discomfort, because it coalesces a raft of conflicting views, tensions and contradictions posed by the idea and experience of modernity.

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[i] NOTES

See also comparative material from the African contexts that link brideprice with domestic violence (eg. Kaye et al 2005 https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1831942/)

[ii] In Papua New Guinea, many people not only refer to the offspring of Papua New Guineans and Europeans or other foreigners as 'mixed race' but also the offspring of relationships between Papua New Guineans from different provinces or cultural groups.

[iii] The current exchange rate for Papua New Guinean Kina: 1 AUD = 2.53 PGK

[iv] Among Tari people of the Southern Highlands, according to Wardlow (2006:120), 'The cash portion of a bridewealth payment is not given in one lump sum, but rather in discrete packets each representing an individual pig…Women are proficient at switching back and forth between these two currencies when talking about their bridewealth payments…'.

[v] See also Feil (1981) who argued that in the case of the Tombema-Enga that once exchange relations are established between the intermarrying groups nearly 'all bridewealth is eventually returned to the groom by the recipients, so that notions of compensation and property transfer to the bride's group may be more apparent that real'

[vi] M. Strathern (1972:118) discusses 'the prestige that accrues to the bride herself from the transactions' and the importance of the 'return-gifts' by the bride's kin for ensuring that their daughter is not 'blamed by her husband's kin for being rubbish (*korpa*) because she has brought them no valuables'.

[vii] An important part of wealth transactions in the Highlands is the identification of the 'root' cause of a situation as an act of violence (Henry 2005). See also Merlan and Rumsey (1991:221).

[viii] Increasingly, in western weddings, instead of household goods and other such gifts, couples are given gifts of money to assist them to establish themselves according to their own desires. In Australia, many couples specifically request on their wedding invitation that guests place an envelope with money into a 'wishing well' or special box placed at the reception for that purpose.