

L'HOMME**L'Homme**

Revue française d'anthropologie

154-155 | avril-septembre 2000

Question de parenté

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**Electronic version**URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lhomme/38>

DOI: 10.4000/lhomme.38

ISSN: 1953-8103

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2000

Number of pages: 373-390

ISBN: 2-7132-1333-9

ISSN: 0439-4216

Electronic referenceAndrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart, « Kinship and Commoditization », *L'Homme* [Online], 154-155 | avril-septembre 2000, Online since 18 May 2007, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lhomme/38> ; DOI : 10.4000/lhomme.38

Kinship and Commoditization

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Andrew Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart

KINSHIP relations are often considered by anthropologists, as well as by those whom they study, to be at the heart of community processes, involving solidarity, reciprocity, reproduction, and alliance. This « kinship model » of small-scale societies throughout Melanesia has implicitly informed recent formulations regarding ideas of personhood in this part of the world, in which social and relational aspects of the person have been strongly foregrounded in the literature. At the same time, the study of kinship systems, seen as based on structured forms of terminologies, has tended to be placed into the background, whereas it was made central in an earlier phase of theorizing, even if from diverse points of view (*e.g.* « extensionist » *vs* « category word » theorists, pro- and anti-genealogy theorists, descent *vs* alliance theory). In this paper we aim to make a contribution to the study of kinship relations and theories of personhood, but principally by looking at aspects of historical change in systemic terms. The changes in which we are interested have in turn, in one way or another, to do with processes of commoditization, as these have affected marriage practices, definitions of personhood, and kin-based relations generally. While some of these processes can be looked at in terms of the intrusion of capitalist-style relations, others have to do with indigenous pre-capitalist processes, or perhaps with the indirect effects of external economic changes. Another purpose of the paper is to point out how issues that arise within the sphere of kinship relations continue to be important to people in social arenas studied by anthropologists in places such as New Guinea, even though anthropological fashions have moved in other directions. While the question of new reproductive technology has brought kinship back into anthropological discussions in a peculiarly specific form, the broader issues of kinship in relation to collective identities, affiliation, land, and exchange continue to change in their own ways in Highlands New Guinea, as elsewhere, and call for serious study (Strathern & Stewart 2000a).

LA PARENTÉ... À QUOI ÇA SERT ?

We also broaden the comparative scope of this paper, which is largely based on New Guinea, by looking at materials from Eastern Indonesia, as a part of a wider comparative exercise called East meets West : Indonesia and Melanesia, in which we demonstrate a continuum of similarity and differences that straddles the conventional division of Indonesian and Melanesian studies (Strathern & Stewart 1999a, 2000b). This comparative scope enables us to examine kin-marriage systems in a single conspectus, and also provides an initial test case for the definition of personhood in kinship terms, such as the case of « slavery » in Eastern Indonesia.

Slavery and Personhood

In Eastern Indonesia we find two main ways in which losses in personhood occurred, through capture in war and through debt-bondage. If war captives could be redeemed by their kin through wealth-payments, analogous to compensation payments for killings found in many parts of New Guinea, they could regain freedom. In some instances children would be taken after a battle in which the adult population was devastated and would be raised by the victorious side.

Some authors provide a definitional distinction between « slaves » proper and « debt-bondsmen » : « debt-bondsmen had a theoretical right to redeem themselves, or [. . .] they could not be sold outside the system »¹. For debt-bonded persons, if they could redeem their debts they could recover their freedom but the debts involved were often too great or were arbitrarily increased by those to whom they were owed. Also, a child might be sold into permanent bondage by indigent parents or a person might sell himself into debt-bondage, from which he could not be redeemed if he was unable to meet his debts and wanted to spare his kin from becoming involved. In all Eastern Indonesian societies a common distinction was made between aristocrats or elders and ordinary people, and slaves. Aristocrats held their position by virtue of seniority defined in both kinship and ritual terms, often by the mechanism that James Fox (1995) has called « apical demotion », whereby a senior primogenitural patrilineal line continuously sloughs off junior branches of the hereditary line.

The Nage people of Central Flores considered that all slaves (*ho'o*, equated with retainers generally) were descendants of war captives, and those formally thought to have been their captors were *mosa laki*, people of high rank (Forth 1998 : 292). *Ho'o* were the category of people most likely to be feared as being witches (*polo*), partly because of « the Nage view of slaves as being, like witches, ultimately of external origin » (*ibid.* : 275). Witches were thought to be people who had become greedy to eat human flesh through a contract with malevolent spirits from whom they aimed to acquire illegitimate wealth. Both slaves and witches could therefore be seen as having lost essential attributes of human personhood that were retained quintessentially by the aristocrats. At the bottom of

1. Reid (1983 : 160) ; he also notes that the distinction is not a hard and fast one.

the social hierarchy the category « slave » thus stood in counterpoint to that of « ritual elder » at its top. Elders were also preeminently insiders and central to social life while slaves were outsiders and peripheral like witches. Witches could be driven out or killed if convicted. Similarly slaves did not possess the right to claim their own lives and could be sacrificed at their master's death. This picture is corroborated by an account of slavery on Tanimbar by Susan McKinnon (1991 : 265 *sq.*) : « Slaves were people who stood unredeemed – utterly severed from their source of life – whose absolute mobility was their most evident defining feature. » If a man took a lover and his « wife-giving » lineage (maternal kin, sources of his « life ») were unable or unwilling to pay the fine incurred for this act, the kin of the woman could seize the man (or a sibling of his) « and sell him or her off as a slave » (*ibid.* : 266). People could in fact be captured for any debt and held against its repayment. If it was not repaid, they were roped and sold off (including from the 17th century onwards to the Dutch East Indies Trading Company). Susan McKinnon comments that the circumstances in which neither patrilineal nor maternal kin would redeem a man included sexual relations with an immediate sister, a slave, or a witch, the last being the most severe transgression (*ibid.*). A slave's connections to his patriline and his maternal bloodline were both cut off, and these were also the pathways of wealth transfer by which the flow of life from its origins was mediated. Interestingly, McKinnon notes that war captives were usually not enslaved, but killed, as was the ordinary practice also in the New Guinea Highlands

These two different cases yield a number of significant points. First, kin relations are highly important for both Nage and Tanimbarese, but they go with a definition of those who had lost their kinship status and thus their local personhood. The « mobility » of the Tanimbar slave reveals that the slave had in fact become a commodity, generated by transgression out of the very heart of constitutive gift-giving, the context of marriage. By historical conjuncture, slaves were linked to the wider colonial slave trade, but the mechanisms of their internal production was indigenous. In the Nage case, both slave and witch were seen as « external », and again the mechanisms of enslavement are precapitalist. Both cases therefore show us clear examples of precapitalist commoditization, generated out of the contexts of kinship and warfare. Both also show the well-known Melanesian principle of the substitutability of valuables for the person in reverse : the substitution of a person for valuables resulting in the person becoming alienable « wealth ».

The ways in which alterations in personhood were manifested in the slave-master relationship varied in Eastern Indonesia. Sometimes a retention of ties with kin existed for a slave as in an example from the Teminabuan area of the Bird's Head of Irian Jaya (Miedema 1995 : 24). In the story a female slave used her healing knowledge to save the life of a woman who was about to die in childbirth. The relatives of the woman who was near death were delighted and wanted to learn from the slave how she had done this. They were told to pay for this knowledge by providing valuable goods back to the slave's relatives. Anthony Reid states (1983 : 162) that inherited slaves in Nias (near Sumatra) had the right

to marriage and funeral fees being met by their master and « a slave therefore had greater certainty of being married than a poor non-slave ». Webb Keane's ethnography of the Anakalangese of Sumba Island (1997 : 60) provides a poignant example of the sense of obligation, dating from 1993, in which a master traveled for an entire day in order to go and retrieve the body of his former slave who had for many years been an independent tobacco seller in another area. When Keane asked why the man had done this he was told : « He would be ashamed not to : what would people say of him if he were unable to take care of the funeral of his own slave ? » (*ibid*).

One last example of how a slave's personhood can be expanded and contracted comes from South Sulawesi (Celebes) where a female slave could be freed if she bore a child by her master, and the child thus begotten also had the rank of freeperson and not slave (Sutherland 1983 : 276).

Exchange marriage and its transformations

Previously, a distinction has been made between systems in which substitutability (as mentioned above) is recognized and those in which it is not, described as like for unlike *vs* like for like systems, or, correspondingly, value conversion *vs* value non-conversion systems². Sister-exchange marriage forms have been cited as prime examples of the « like for like » principle (and by Godelier [1991] as the « great man » model of society). Here we consider how some of these forms have themselves been transformed in contexts of commoditization. These practices belong to low population density areas with numerous small groups, often fragile demography, and little political elaboration other than warfare by raiding, and accusations of witchcraft and sorcery. Sister-exchange is a means of claiming early reciprocity in cases where wider mechanisms for producing trust are absent. In this regard we may contrast it with forms of cousin marriage that imply such extensions of trust, particularly the form known as matrilineal connubium found very widely in Eastern Indonesia and also among the Moi of the Bird's Head area of Irian Jaya. Our argument here is that sister exchange forms can be rapidly replaced when mechanisms for mediated exchange appear. We take three examples, two from Papua New Guinea, one from the southern coast of Irian Jaya.

The Gebusi, numbering 450 people, live in the Strickland-Bosavi area served by the Nomad Patrol Post, and came into government contact in 1963. They practiced both sister exchange and forms of non-reciprocal marriage dependent on choice. They traditionally paid no brideprice, grooms did not do bride service, and affines were often coresident in the same longhouse. Bruce Knauff argues (1985) that this combination of marriage by choice and marriage by sister exchange, together with the absence of payment in labor or goods, led to problems and was correlated with the incidence of sorcery accusations between

2. Knauff 1985, A. Strathern 1982, Thomas 1995, Godelier 1982, 1986, 1991, Lemonnier 1986, Stewart & Strathern 1998a.

families, although his informants did not see these in that light. The ethos of « good company » prevailed but was insufficient to control homicidal violence in the rather numerous cases of sorcery/witchcraft accusations. Sister exchange was a preferential ideal, but another ideal was that of the individually chosen marriage which Knauft calls « romantic ».

The Gebusi, studied by Knauft in 1980, were affected by epidemics of introduced diseases producing demographic problems in managing sister exchanges. Their neighbors, the Bedamini, intermarried with and intruded on them, increasing inter-clan instability, especially between larger and smaller clans. Smaller groups could not meet their exchange liabilities, were accused of sorcery and lost more members through revenge killings against them. Knauft (*ibid.* : 321) calls the situation a « self-imploding crucible ». Concomitantly, the Gebusi began to develop a desire for introduced trade goods, and these were inserted into « appeasement » payments made by men to wife's immediate kin when no sister was exchanged in return (cloth, pearl shells, steel axes), a practice that was encouraged by colonial administrators who heard cases of marital disputes and lent their prestige to the brideprice model. The stage was set for a systemic shift, for both internal and external reasons.

A similar pattern is shown among the inhabitants of Fredrik-Hendrik (Kolepom) island as studied by Laurentius Serpenti in 1960-62. The island was home to a number of speakers of different languages who carried out head-hunting raids on each other and subsisted by constructing dwelling islands from floating swamp grasses. They were subject to epidemics of dysentery and malaria and were greatly concerned with ensuring the growth of boys and with reproduction. Sister exchange marriage was again the ideal, and there was a high level of distrust between small local groups, each group insisting on reciprocity but at the same time « intent on getting as many women as possible, if necessary at the expense of other local groups » (Serpenti 1965 : 128). The acquisition of several wives was possible for men who had gained prestige through their strength and their abilities as head-hunters. These men were also the ones who were selected to produce semen that would be rubbed on the boy initiates within the men's house as part of the ritual to assist in their growth.

Serpenti notes that traditionally brideprice was known but rare. At the time of his fieldwork the people had been regrouped by government and Catholic missionary influences, and brideprice marriage was becoming more common. To deal with demographic problems the people had developed a highly complex system of claiming children as the future means to pay off « sister exchange » debts. This system, which Serpenti calls one of « adoption », also shows clearly the use of people to pay off debts, a kind of people-currency that required children to switch familial membership in order to pay marriage debts. The whole set of arrangements began to alter when the government and church authorities encouraged choice, prohibited the use of force to recover runaway girls, lessened the risks of defaulting on debt payments between groups through introduced « pacification », and introduced trade goods that parents sought to obtain through

brideprice payments. The men's house rituals of growing boys through rubbing semen into cuts in their skin was abolished by the Church, leaving younger men free to migrate on contract labor where they would obtain money to buy trade goods that could funnel into the brideprice system.

The Kimam case shows an existing combination of brideprice marriage as an alternative to sister exchange, making a deflection into the former simple and expectable. The Etoro people, neighbors of the Gebusi in PNG, show a further systemic possibility. They did not prohibit sister exchange but favored as an ideal the delayed exchange form of FZSD marriage, along with a differential age for first marriage between males and females. They numbered 400 at the time Raymond Kelly studied them in 1968 and had suffered, like the Gebusi, from epidemics that had reduced their population by 50% in the preceding fifteen years, which greatly increased accusations of witchcraft and, in return, the punitive killing of witches. Patrilineal lines therefore were insistent on mutual reciprocity in exchanges of women between them. In accordance with the delayed character of these exchanges, the Etoro also regularly paid brideprice, but this did not lead them to deflect away from demands for reciprocity in women, and, according to Kelly, at the time of study they had not acquired a desire for European trade goods. Hence they were not shifting into a brideprice model instead of the delayed exchange rule.

The Etoro delayed-reciprocity system provided more flexibility than immediate sister exchange. FZSD marriage was only an example of a wider category of marriageable women, governed by the rule of delayed return. The system therefore did not immediately yield to outside influence. If trade goods later entered into the picture they could be absorbed, at least for a time, into existing brideprices. The same held in many parts of the Central Highlands. It was interesting to see in the 1990s among the Duna, a people of the Southern Highlands Province, how they viewed sister exchange. This type of marriage, they declared, was acceptable (though not preferred), but it did not exempt its participants from brideprice, which under all circumstances had to be paid. Money had also entered Duna brideprice payments and, by the end of the 1990s, increasingly large amounts of it were being demanded in spite of the relative lack of development of cash cropping and wage labor in the area. As with the Kimam, the boys' growth rituals among the Duna (*palena nane*) had been abandoned under the influence of Christianity, leaving young men free to leave the area in the quest for money to make brideprice payments (Stewart & Strathern 1998b; Strathern & Stewart 1999f).

These examples show the varying trajectories followed by these different societies in response to demographic, social, and political changes. A shift away from the maintenance of reciprocities between small sets of groups goes along with the expansion of ranges of ties made possible through colonial pacification. Brideprice instead of sister exchange enables, as Dianne van Oosterhout (1996) points out for the Inatwatan of Irian Jaya, « chains of relationships » to come into existence. But these same chains could, of course, and did, come into being also in conjunction with matrilineal connubium as practiced widely in Eastern Indonesia, and well described by McKinnon (1991) on Tanimbar and Barraud (1979) on the Kei

islands. McKinnon's account gives a particularly rich and complex picture of how wife-giver/wife-taker relations ordered ties over time between « rows » of named houses within a community and how there was an idea of a « Great Row » of houses linked together in this way. Marriage exchanges in classic form required that along with a woman « female » valuables (*e.g.* female earrings, necklaces, shell arm bands, cloth, and food) should be given while the wife-takers provided « male » valuables (*e.g.* elephant tusks, gold pendants, male earrings, meat, and palmwine) in response. McKinnon makes it clear how these exchanges expressed the superior rank of wife-givers and how the relations were structural ones maintained over time by which the personhood of everyone (other than slaves, as we have seen) was conserved. A typical East Indonesian feature here is the significance of the house itself³. When we turn from Tanimbar to the westernmost tip of the Bird's Head of Irian Jaya, to the Moi people studied by Paul Haenen (1988 : 465-466), we find that this emphasis on « house » and « row » apparently has disappeared, even though the Moi practice preferential matrilineal cross-cousin marriage. As Haenen points out, the non-prescriptive character of the actual alliances (*i.e.* the specific ties between groups) « provides a kin-group with the freedom to surround itself with a plurality of wife-givers or wife-takers » (*ibid.* : 469). This is true of many, if not most such systems, since only a few marriages, or a single one, may be sufficient to renew a particular alliance tie over time, but where there is a « house » system there tends to be a greater fixity of alliance ties. Haenen, by contrast, stresses the plurality of gift circuits among the Moi. Concomitantly, he notes that « the personal preference of marriage candidates » in coastal areas may intervene to curtail a particular alliance tie (*ibid.* : 466). We see here the likelihood of similar change factors to those cited for the sister exchange case in PNG. Behind the category of « personal preference », there may lie both individual desires that predate current changes and a world of commoditizations that has intermingled with these desires.

Haenen himself interestingly raises the question of whether the Moi system is elementary or complex. Moi kin terms show Omaha forms, which Lévi-Strauss (1969 : 39) links to the mutual exclusion of alliance and kinship and thus the development of complex systems. Haenen points out that the Moi say that they marry their « little mother » (m.s.) or their « sons » (f.s.), in other words they recognize a kind of paradox but continue to practice it. Perhaps we can comment that people are able to live with contradictions if these are mediated by the idea of « comparison » : that MBD is « like mother » but not « the same ». Also that many MBD marriage systems show the Moi feature of open and multiple alliances, yet the structure of exchanges between wife-takers and wife-givers is always maintained (cf. Haenen 1988 : 476), hence in this respect the system is « elementary ».

Another interesting point here is that all of these people gave particularly forthright comments to ethnographers on types of marriages of which they dis-

3. Following up the importance of this category as suggested by Lévi-Strauss, see Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995.

approved. The Kimam prohibited cross-cousin marriage, declaring: « Whom would we be giving food to in that case? We would be exchanging gifts with ourselves! » (Serpenti 1965 : 135). But the Moi prefer cross-cousin marriage while prohibiting sister exchange. They justify this by saying: « Brides are not objects to be exchanged just like that » (Haenen 1988 : 465). What one group prohibits another prefers and each appeals to « self-evident » propositions to legitimize its practices. The Moi saw sister exchange as an inappropriate form of « barter », but that is not at all how it was seen by the Gebusi or Kimam, who regarded it as an ideal form of « exchange ».

Modern Commoditizations

The recognition of the importance of examining kinship materials from the New Guinea Highlands arose partially from the realization that principles of descent were insufficient to account for the factualities of local group composition and that all aspects of life were deeply affected by gendered practices of exchange⁴.

The earlier anthropological debates on kinship and descent in the ethnographies on Melanesia no longer receive the same heightened level of discussion in theoretical analysis as they once did. Nowadays more emphasis is placed on the impact of « modernity » on societies in general. It is true that the contemporary lives of many peoples of Papua New Guinea (PNG) have dramatically altered through the innumerable changes that have occurred in the postcolonial period. Independence came to PNG in 1975. In the subsequent quarter of a century, urbanization, the growth of violence, the conversion of many New Guineans to Christianity, wage labor, migration, monetization, and the commoditized consumer economy, as well as the impingement of new political and legal frameworks, have all converged on this nation whose remote interior was penetrated only in the 1930s (Strathern & Stewart 1999c, 1999d).

New Guineans have dealt with these « twisted histories and altered contexts » (to use the title of Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington's book [1991] that details the history of change among the Chambri of PNG) in many ways, but they always tend to feel the pressures of their own kin relationships bearing upon them (*ibid.* : 105). Michael French Smith writing on the Kragur people of East Sepik Province (1984) provides a commonly noted example of this sort of problem that arises when business ventures are entered into: « One older woman once complained to me at length about how she worked hard to grow tobacco, but when people saw it hanging from the rafters of her house they all asked for it and she did not feel free to refuse. She seemed to see putting things on a commercial footing an innovation she associated with the achievement of national independence early that year, as at least a partial solution to her problem.

4. *E.g.* A. Strathern 1969, 1979; Strathern & Stewart 1999b; Stewart & Strathern 1998c; Feil 1984; Brown 1978; Josephides 1983; Lederman 1986; LiPuma 1988; M. Strathern 1972, 1988; Weiner 1982.

Berating the alleged stream of villagers coming to carry away her tobacco, she pronounced: “We’re Papua New Guinea now! You must pay for my tobacco! I worked hard on it!” (*ibid.*: 174). Smith’s informant was invoking a national identity in order to separate herself, at least in terms of her business venture, from her embeddedness within the local nexus of kin relationships. In this example, kin identity is suppressed so as to maximize the individual’s gains. The inverse also occurs in instances where a desire to obtain goods leads to kin identifications being pressed into service even where they clearly do not exist. An example of this is given by Gewertz and Errington (1991: 178-185) in which a Chambri woman was beaten to death inside the Wewak police barracks by the wives of three police officers. In an attempt to obtain a compensation payment for the death, the Chambri « were viewing the police as a kin group, collectively responsible for the actions, in whatever capacity, of its members and their wives ». An attack on the police station took place and threats of further reprisals were uttered in an attempt to force the police to pay for the woman’s death – « Thus, the Chambri in their grievance with the state [. . .] were asserting their efficacy and autonomy by forcefully negotiating their rights and responsibilities as they would with any other group » (*ibid.*: 184-185). Here we see that defining a national body in kin terms brings them down to the level of the local group in order to express the deeply rooted commoditized relationships that exist between groups (cf. also A. Strathern 1993; Stewart & Strathern 1998a).

Two case studies from the Hagen area of the Western Highlands Province of PNG will further illustrate the innovative ways in which people are defining kin relationships. Extensive ethnographic materials from the area exist dating back to the 1930s and onward⁵.

The materials presented were collected from our work among the Kawelka people since 1997. One case demonstrates the sorts of conflicts that arise over the ambiguous affiliation of a child and the creative means that are employed to resolve the situation. The second case involves the « adoption » of a young male by a woman who has many daughters but no sons and is in a marriage situation with three co-wives.

Claiming a grandson

The first case relates to a young Kawelka man (H), living in the capital city, Port Moresby, who became involved in two sexual relationships, neither of which included the transfer of bridewealth or a church wedding (see Strathern & Stewart 2000a). One of these women bore H a male child. The mother (C) was Chimbu on her mother’s side and Kerema (Gulf Province) on her father’s side. This woman was prepared to take her son back to the Chimbu area because of the difficulties arising out of the relationship of H with his second sexual part-

5. *E.g.* Vicedom & Tischner 1943-1948; Strauss & Tischner 1962; A. Strathern 1969, 1971; Strathern & Stewart 1998a; Stewart & Strathern 1998a; Merlan & Rumsey 1991.

ner who was a Mendi woman (M). The paternal grandfather (R) of H's son did not want to lose the affiliation of this boy with the Kawelka. He arranged for a feast to be prepared for which the mother, her son, and some of C's female kin were brought to one of the Kawelka settlements in Hagen to be honored and to receive money and food. The aim was to claim the boy's affiliation to the Kawelka. In doing this, R wished to differentiate his agnatic line from others in his lineage, to secure his own landed interests, to differentiate his lineage from others in the clan, and to assist in differentiating the Kawelka from their neighbors, avoiding their absorption into the political arenas of others.

His task in doing so contained some difficulties. The affiliation of a grandson would ordinarily follow from: 1. The marriage of a son by payment of bridewealth to the mother and her kin. 2. The proximity of the bride's group, at least within the same council or language area. 3. The residence of the wife on her husband's territory. 4. The continuing good relations with wife's kin expressed in matrilineal payments for children. In this instance conditions 1 to 3 were absent and 4 was partially secured through this feasting event.

The Chimbu female kin, who represented themselves without any men of their male kin and any relatives from the Kerema side at the occasion, had done most of the practical work of caring for the boy and feeding him. The food and money therefore correspond to factor 4 above, to make good relations but also to demarcate the ties involved. Lacking factors 1 to 3, R had to rely on a new application of 4, transforming it from an integral part in a flow of exchanges into a single instance that helped to define the boy's affiliation as being primarily Kawelka.

The new multi-site, multi-ethnic situation in which families find themselves in places like Hagen today is altering the conditions for the creation of kinship. It is transaction that works on substance, differentiating persons through wealth. This was so in the past, and then as now the opportunities for individual agency thus provided led to complexity and flexibility, but these provisions are further compounded nowadays by the unraveling of packages of practices (such as 1 to 4 above) and the need for creative improvisation. The boy-affiliation described here also represented a rescripting of an ancient custom, symbolically linked with the origins of groups, known as *kng maepokla*, the «*maepokla* pig» gift, in which a payment to the mother's kin of a child was made in the form of a pig or shell valuables (Vicedom & Tischner 1943-1948, II: 243). The historical resonances of this earlier practice were seen in the feast given to C and her kin.

These events, executed in the performance modalities of paying, giving, and sharing, can be further illuminated by reference to debates about gifts *vs* commodities in Melanesia (*e.g.* Carrier & Carrier 1992, M. Strathern 1988, Weiner 1994) and in Eastern Indonesia, as we have seen from the examples given at the beginning of this paper. R's transactional acts were presented as «buying» the boy's affiliation in the public speeches made in Melpa (the local language) or as simply creating a basis for shared good will between the boy's Hagen and Chimbu kin in the speeches made in the *lingua franca* Tok Pisin for the benefit of the Chimbu who do not speak Melpa. These transactions aiming at producing an

affiliation can be viewed as « commodity » and/or « gift » oriented, particularly in circumstances of commoditization of social relations as in Hagen today, but also in the precapitalist contexts themselves (see Gell 1992 ; Görlich 1998).

Claiming a “son”

The second case involves a Hagen woman (E) who had no sons but many daughters and who had effectively distanced herself from her husband, who has three other wives, while remaining in her husband's settlement. In 1998 she told us : « I don't ask for or receive anything from my husband. I do everything by myself ». E was at first a devout Catholic but subsequently became baptized into the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (AOG) Church. As part of her involvement in the Church, she provides Christian guidance to young people in her community. One youth that she took under her mentorship was a boy (Y) who had been involved in a number of « rascal » activities, thefts and acts of physical violence to obtain money or goods such as radios. E is Y's *mam* (classificatory mother, FBW). She brought Y into her house to live with her as her son and began teaching him about the Bible and eventually sent him to study to become a Pastor for the AOG Church, one of a number of charismatic churches in PNG that foretell some dramatic change which is going to occur in the years 2000-2001⁵. Some Hageners say that the world will end and the « faithful » will be taken to live in Heaven which has been described by one of our female Hagen informants as a place where no work will need to be done to obtain food, where humans will not be gendered as male or female, and where each person will have their own individual cell to live in (Stewart & Strathern 1998f). Others, such as Y, say that people must prepare themselves to have a better life by the year 2000 so that the future will be marked by less violence and theft.

Y is a charismatic youth who easily shifts from Melpa to Tok Pisin in the sermons that he gives. He has gone into the coffee business with his father while still providing the services of a son to E. He has thus been partly « adrogated » in McKinnon's terms (1991 : 99), but this does not imply that he has been « abrogated » from his immediate natal family, who live nearby and hold the land on which E herself gardens. Y has a wife and since he is baptized in the AOG church he is not allowed to take a second wife. Polygamy was a common practice in the past and was the means by which a single man could produce, via the labor of his wives, the goods needed to effectively participate in the competitive exchange nexus known as *moka*. But nowadays the old *moka* exchange system is not commonly practiced, having gone into decline over the last ten years. Like the practice of polygamy, it is considered to be a sinful form of behavior for those who have entered into the churches and is equated with excessive greed. Also, the PNG Council of Churches has called for Members of Parliament to formulate legislation to eliminate polygamy in PNG (*Post Courier*, 3 December 1998).

5. Stewart & Strathern 1998d, 1998e ; Stewart & Strathern, eds, 1997.

In addition to the battles over polygamy, brideprice payments are also coming under question. For over a decade now, brideprice payments in the Hagen area have been on the rise not only as a new form of competitive transaction between men but also as a way for defining new arenas for mothers to obtain larger sums of money at the marriage of their daughters (Stewart & Strathern 1998a). The churches do not support large brideprice payments and are opposed to a brideprice being paid at all until the couple has been married in a church service.

The ramifying circumstances surrounding the affiliation of Y, in our second case, have been deliberately introduced in order to give some idea of the ways in which religious, political, and economic changes diversely affect the domains of kinship and marriage. Polygamy does not coexist easily with Christian monogamy, and monogamy is promulgated just at the time when *moka* exchange is being abandoned as a means of producing status and alliance. Without *moka* it is likely that the old stress on symmetrical marriage exchanges between allied groups, and the congruence between *moka* and patterns of military support, will become less meaningful, although modern politics provides a new context and purpose for alliance making and re-making. While religious and other forces of change work synergistically in some contexts, they act to exert negative feedback on each other as well, such as when inflation in brideprice payments is countered by the policy of the churches. Not all events are examples of commoditization, since the churches in some ways attempt to construct a new morality of giving to the church and giving to one's « family in God » that replaces the old kinship-based ethic of giving and sharing, although we also see that local congregations are made up of members who are largely related to one another through kinship ties. Further, men and women alike seek ways to increase their personal prestige and influence within the community through their involvement in church activities. Some established male leaders who become baptized into a church try to mark the occasion as being particularly prestigious through a lengthy build-up time in which pigs and goods are secured to be used for the feast marking the baptism. These goods are acquired in a manner similar to the old *moka* set of transactions in which a man could go to those whom he knew to be in a « debt » status to him and ask for repayment at the *moka*. But nowadays these transactions involve women in ways that were not permitted in the past. The baptismal feast of these men is thus an occasion on which the men are recognized as « big-men » once more in the new realm of church life.

The two cases themselves show a continuing concern with affiliation issues in the realm of kinship. Both men and women need sons and grandsons whose loyalty and help they can draw upon as sources of long-term assistance and prestige for themselves, in a world where kin ties and commoditized activities such as cash-cropping uneasily co-exist.



All of the data we have reviewed here exhibit a complex mesh of possibilities for persons to appear as subjects or objects in contexts of action. Slavery and debt-

bondage represent personhood « at the limit » when a subject, defined as possessing agency, is in formal terms converted into an object through relationship with a « master », and can pass like a valuable in transactions. Yet Reid's survey account of South East Asia makes it clear that slaves were granted, or could achieve, considerable agency (and personhood) in the older indigenous contexts. Conversely, valuables themselves might be credited with agency and so with personhood, in certain contexts (as in marriage exchanges on Tanimbar); or also could be like senior persons in belonging to the « house » as inalienable objects that must not be exchanged. Howell (1989) has stressed the participatory relationship between giver and gift among the Lio people of Flores, following the Maussian paradigm, and the same model can be applied also to things not given. Personhood itself is subject to categorical sub-definitions and to a sliding scale of powers that define degrees of subject or object-like capacity (Strathern & Stewart 1998b, Strathern & Stewart, eds, 2000).

Our main purpose in this regard has been to show that processes of commoditization, often linked by writers to modernity or capitalism, occur also in pre-capitalist contexts, springing in the case of slavery out of conditions of captivity or debt-bondage. From this account we passed on to those minimal commoditizations that could be shown to operate in early historical conditions of colonial change impinging on sister-exchange marriage arrangements. Our argument here has been twofold. First, change is always a result of interplay between endogenous sources of tension or conflict, and externally induced opportunities, such as are provided by the intervention of prestigious outsiders arriving with wealth goods. Both sides in the encounter act as historical subjects. Second, the substitution of sister exchange by brideprice payments is a kind of commoditization, but it is also an invention of a kind of gift exchange, so that what is a commodity at one turn becomes a gift at the next, as happened already in indigenous trade. Hence neither sister exchange nor brideprice marriage necessarily produce persons as objects or object-equivalents. Substitutability does not remove personhood or agency in this regard, and may indeed increase choice.

Here we have considered commoditizations in more advanced circumstances of change where capitalist relations have more strongly permeated social patterns. We have shown the enduring concern that underlies new and improvised ways of creating affiliations in Hagen and the complex processes that are engendered by the encounter between economic changes and Christianity. This has led to hyper-commoditizations that are opposed by the anti-commoditizations of Christian ideology, and to the recreation of the image of the *moka* ethos in baptismal celebrations. Modern conditions give rise to new definitions of personhood that overlap with and extend out from older ones based on kinship and exchange.

From all of the ethnographic examples that we have examined, we see that the ethnographer has already, even in the earliest reports, been confronted by societies that are undergoing change in their kinship practices. Thus, we might suggest that no rigid form of analysis can be imposed upon these societies since, like all social systems, they exist because they are in a state of perpetual flux – at times greater

than expected by analytical models and at other less than expected. We find ourselves at a point where a renewed ethnography of kinship in New Guinea (and elsewhere) needs to develop models of the future shape of kin groupings that do not simply posit dissolutions or entropy, or remain fixed in the historical past which has long since evaporated. One example of theorizing in a constructive vein has been provided by Achsah and James Carrier (1991) on the Ponam people of Manus, among whom the patrilineal *kamal* descent groups have persisted but lack their former functions relating to the arrangement of marriages and exchange networks. Another example shows the interplay of denials of kinship and recreation of it in new modes seen in our juxtaposition of materials from Kragur and Chambri. We can enquire into what happens at more advanced stages of change in the « minimalist » examples we gave in the section on exchange marriage and its transformations. Since the Etoro patrilineage is portrayed as working in a way structurally similar to the Ponam *kamal* (Carrier & Carrier 1991), one could envisage it losing its functions if the marriage system shifted further away from direct exchange. And have the Moi shifted further from matrilineal marriage since the 1980s? Theoretical speculation must go hand in hand with empirical study, influenced in turn by the vagaries of history.

In 1998 we were told, while working in the Hagen and Duna areas, that AIDS had arrived in PNG for the first time. Both people had elaborate stories of how AIDS had penetrated into their country (Stewart & Strathern 1998f). The Hageners were spreading coded rumors about the families that were afflicted. The narratives about AIDS gave powerful credence both to Christian teachings about monogamy and to notions that the world might be ending shortly since God is thought to have sent this plague as a punishment and to have prevented scientists from developing an effective treatment. In light of the uncertainty of who is carrying the HIV virus and who is not, the churches are recommending that people refrain from promiscuous behavior and that all couples go to the health clinic to be tested for AIDS prior to being married.

Some Hageners have predicted that, if AIDS is not curbed, « we [Hageners] will all die out, the present generation will not live to be old » – a notion that contradicted the strategies of people like the protagonists in our two cases from Hagen to ensure the continuity of their kin-based networks of support in the future. Another Hageners gleefully described how AIDS was among her people now and said she was delighted since it would kill only non-Christians and thus, in her view, leave the world a better place to live in. The news of AIDS brought with it an image of time's possible end written on the body itself, much as it might have earlier, at the time of first contact for many New Guineans who suffered enormous loss of population due to introduced epidemics (Strathern & Stewart 1999e). One can only wonder how AIDS will appear in the myths of New Guinea in generations to come. Perhaps it will be yet another version of the well known old myth that, with sexual intercourse, death entered into the world.

KEYWORDS/MOTS CLÉS : personhood/*personne* – slavery/*esclavage* – commoditization/*marchandisation* – exchange/*échange* – marriage/*mariage* – New Guinea/*Nouvelle Guinée* – Eastern Indonesia/*Indonésie orientale* – affiliation/*affiliation* – bridewealth/*compensation matrimoniale* – gift/*don*.

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RÉSUMÉ/ABSTRACT

Andrew Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart, *Kinship and Commoditization : Historical Transformations*. — This paper reviews a number of themes pertinent to comparative studies in kinship, personhood, and marriage practices, based on cases drawn from the ethnography of New Guinea and Eastern Indonesia. The case of « slavery » is taken initially as a test for ideas about personhood and exchange, since slavery may be taken to represent the transformation of a person into a commodity. However, examination of the data suggests that this interpretation is too simple. Person for person exchanges in restricted (elementary) forms of marriage are next considered, along with ways in which such systems change with the introduction of new commodities and the entry of these into bridewealth payments. Finally, we consider contemporary commoditizations of social relations in general in highlands Papua New Guinea and discuss how these changes have impacted kinship ties, including processes of affiliation of children to kin groups.

Andrew Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart, *Parenté et marchandisation : transformations au cours de l'histoire*. — Cet article aborde un certain nombre de thèmes essentiels aux études comparées sur la parenté, la personne et les pratiques matrimoniales, en se fondant sur des exemples ethnographiques de Papouasie-Nouvelle Guinée et d'Indonésie orientale. Ainsi l'esclavage, parce qu'il représente par excellence la transformation d'une personne en marchandise, est-il pris comme paradigme du rapport entre personne et échange. Toutefois, l'analyse des données laisse à penser qu'il s'agit là d'une interprétation par trop simpliste. Il est ensuite question des échanges de personnes dans certaines formes (élémentaires) de mariage, en même temps que de la façon dont de tels systèmes se sont modifiés avec l'introduction de nouvelles marchandises et leur utilisation dans le prix de la fiancée. Enfin, les auteurs traitent de la récente marchandisation des relations sociales dans les Hautes-Terres de Papouasie-Nouvelle Guinée, et montrent comment ces changements ont modifié les liens de parenté, notamment les processus d'affiliation des enfants au groupe de parenté.