



**HAL**  
open science

# Urban Women and the Transformations of Braedpraes in Honiara

Christine Jourdan, Fabienne Labbé

► **To cite this version:**

Christine Jourdan, Fabienne Labbé. Urban Women and the Transformations of Braedpraes in Honiara. Oceania, 2020, Bridewealth and the Autonomy of Women, 90 (3), pp.253-272. 10.1002/ocea.5279 . halshs-03096481

**HAL Id: halshs-03096481**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03096481v1>**

Submitted on 13 Mar 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Urban Women and the Transformations of *Braedpraes*<sup>1</sup> in Honiara<sup>2</sup>

Christine Jourdan  
*Concordia University*

Fabienne Labbé  
*EHESS-CREDO*

### ABSTRACT

In the capital city of the Solomon Islands, brideprice is often given to formalize the marriage of young couples from the island of Malaita. For the young wife, brideprice is a reminder that she is expected to work and produce children for the lineage of her husband, an obligation that is at times strongly impressed upon her by her in-laws. Data gathered in Honiara over the last 15 years, most recently in 2015-2016, show the emergence of a variety of patterns among Malaitan women living in Honiara regarding their productive and reproductive autonomy, and their role in brideprice. Beyond their diversity, what these data reveal, we argue, is that the interstitial cultural spaces created by the urbanization of social and economic relations afford young urban women the possibility of engaging with brideprice in a way that had not been possible until then. We demonstrate that, as members of an emerging new middle-class, these women seek (either in agreement with their husbands, or in spite of them) to transform the meaning of brideprice: while showing respect to their in-laws and to tradition, their goal is to gain greater control over their life within the confine of brideprice sociality.

### KEYWORDS

Brideprice; marriage; women's autonomy; urbanization; Solomon Islands

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, the interest of Melanesian anthropology for brideprice has put an emphasis on its socioeconomic dimension within large systems of alliance building through marriage, with particular attention to its status as a gift or commodity (see Gregory 1982 for a general analysis). More recently, the increasing importance of cash in brideprice throughout Melanesia as reported by ethnographers has led scholars to revisit these issues (see Jolly 2015 and Sykes 2013 for some of the most recent examples). Ethnographers also increasingly report on how the commodification of brideprice has affected the spirit of exchange, and how this change affects the relationships between spouses (see for example Hess 2009 for Vanuatu; Nicolas 2012 and Salomon 2000 for New Caledonia; and Wardlow 2006 for New Guinea;); serves as a justification for domestic violence (Eves 2006; SPC 2009)<sup>3</sup>; and affects the agency and autonomy (or lack thereof) of women and their desire to become independent of the control of elders and husbands (Jourdan 1998; Macintyre 2011; Wardlow 2006).

Scholars have also shifted their gaze towards questions relating to identity (Faugère 2013; Servy 2017; Wardlow 2006), wondering why, as did Rosi and Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1993), Jourdan (1998) and Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1998), the practice of giving brideprice continues in urban centers<sup>4</sup>, though Macintyre (2011) shows that young Lihir women in Papua New Guinea vehemently object to it.

Keeping with the theme of this volume, and focusing on brideprice exchanges as practiced in the Solomon Islands capital of Honiara by urbanites originating from the island of Malaita, we examine here the impacts brideprice has on the lives of women themselves from the vantage point of social change and urbanization. It is important to

note that brideprice is not given at marriage in all areas of the Solomon Islands, and that it has become emblematic of the Eastern part of the country, namely the provinces of Malaita, Makira, Guadalcanal and Temotu.

We are interested here in the perspectives that women have on a practice that even some of the youngest embrace or accept, albeit with some reservation, though they have little or no control over it. We will argue that urbanization, and attendant multiculturalism, are offering women different models of marriage and family relations that put pressure on brideprice and are transforming it. Whereas in the past women had little agency regarding their own brideprice, some urban women in Honiara today are taking stock of the possibilities that education, work and income, changing lifestyles and family relations can offer them to play a role regarding their own brideprice. These changes are accompanied by the rise of companionate marriage as the preferred type of matrimonial union and render manifest the desire that young urban people, and women in particular, have for more autonomy, financial or personal, from their elders. We focus here on three facets of women's lives that brideprice constrains: their sexuality, their social autonomy as women and as mothers, and material aspects of their lives<sup>5</sup>.

Using Homi Bhabha's concept of 'interstitial space' (Bhabha 2004), we analyze the ways in which women are trying to circumvent or at least mitigate the negative effects that brideprice has on their lives. As part of his theory of hybridity, Bhabha claims that 'It is in the emergence of the interstices — the overlap and displacement of domains of difference — that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated' (2004:39). We see them as cultural spaces that open up during social change (producing it but also as resulting from it) and

which can be occupied by new ways of being in-the-world, and new ideologies. Here, urbanization and the concomitant transformation of the ideology of the family and of kinship relationships, and at times of gender roles, open up new cultural spaces that make it possible for practices such as brideprice to be examined, but also challenged at times, and even redefined. We will show that in this urban setting women are best understood not as passive subjects of a practice that constrains their lives, but rather as active agents in brideprice's transmission and transformation. This agency is most apparent in the interstitial spaces afforded by the urbanization of social relations.

#### URBAN LIVING AND INTERSTITIAL SPACES

Over the years of its young history, Honiara morphed from a colonial port town to the capital city of the independent Solomon Islands. Its population now reaches about 85,000 people, and around 59,000 of them are age 30 or younger (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2013). Its inhabitants, both permanent and temporary, hail from all parts of the archipelago. Around 70 different language groups are present in town (Jourdan 1987), with attendant cultural diversity—alterity reigns. People are exposed to and at times confronted by language and cultural rules different from their own. Some of them must negotiate these differences on a daily basis (Jourdan 1996).

In young postcolonial Melanesian urban centers such as Honiara, different cultures intermingle and interact to create new social worlds amidst rapid socio-cultural change. But contrary to what one might expect, this does not lead to the disappearance of webs of meanings that are anchored in rural areas. To the contrary, these meanings are sustained by various practices in multiple contexts, though often they are stretched,

transformed and at times repurposed (see Lindstrom and Jourdan 2017). For instance, writing about small domestic stores in Port Vila, Rio (2017) shows that they are an urban adaptation and response to the ideology of ‘demand sharing’<sup>6</sup> that exists in rural areas among close kin. Writing about Suva, Brison (2017) explains that the use of Facebook among kin has reconfigured kinship ties, which are now more inclusive. Likewise, Hukula (2017) argues that kinship ties in Port Moresby (PNG) are extended to include people sharing one’s lifestyle. In Honiara, brideprice is an example of a practice whose meaning is progressively being redefined.

These changes are taking place under two very different sets of influences. One is that, as Jourdan has explained (1996:184), ‘town life is still connected to life in the villages, through a two-way flow of information that circulates between towns and villages.’ Some of the moral constructions that underlie the urban social life of Honiarans still connect urbanites to their home villages (Akin 1999). Indeed, these constructions are often at the core of how people define their urban identity, which they often perceive in ethnic (Berg 2000) and moral terms (Stritecky 2001), and increasingly in social terms (Jourdan 1996): obligations to kin; compensatory payments when customary ways are breached; respect for elders; social responsibility, and so forth.

Yet the town is also shaped by inheritances from the British colonial world (the Solomon Islands were a British Protectorate until 1978) such as the country’s political, administrative and legal infrastructures. Other global influences are also apparent in global economic demands for commodity production and consumption; global popular culture in the forms of music, arts, video and television that mingle with locally produced forms; the ideologies of the different Christian churches that foster and reinforce models

of the nuclear family and individualism (Akin 1993; Jolly and Macintyre 2010; Stritecky 2001); and the presence of a well-travelled and well-educated urban middle class and urban elite (Berg 2000; Gooberman-Hill 1999; Jourdan 1996) who adopt lifestyles that can starkly differentiate them from the rural members of their families. All of these models constitute guides for urban living; they offer a variety of choices and options to urbanites as they participate in the development of a local urban culture, while they also constrain other avenues and possibilities (see also Hannerz 1987; Jourdan 1996). As we will see in this paper, marriage and brideprice are domains where these choices and options are becoming visible.

The interaction between these two sets of socioeconomic and moral configurations has led some scholars to consider them under the theme of hybridity. Jourdan (1996) speaks of this cultural world in terms of hybridity and creolization; Moore (2015) refers to Honiara as a hybrid town. Creolization and hybridity index flexibility, and the advantage of conceptualizing Honiara in these terms lies in the emphasis it puts on cultural contacts and the transformations provoked by cultural interactions. Following Bhabha (1994), we can say that the cultural transformations that distinguish urban from rural ways of life in Honiara happen in cultural spaces that are interstitial in nature. These are spaces in which there is room to maneuver and one can, and in some cases must, negotiate meanings so that all the systems can continue. In these spaces of coexisting identities linked to gender, ethnicity, age or emerging class, encounters with the Other and other practices and ways of thinking force a cultural translation (Bhabha 2004:39)—a cultural reanalysis (Jourdan 1996)—that leads to change. Of course these negotiations and translations are often discordant, and the stories

of the women we present below reveal the struggles they face in their efforts to uphold, challenge, or transform brideprice.

Urbanites must also contend with attacks on their legitimacy as members of their cultural groups. Many still find meaning in the cultural world of the village, particularly those who have recently arrived in town and those who regularly circulate between the two worlds, or who remain involved, though at a distance, in the village activities (e.g., by contributing to ceremonies such as funerals, or by building a house in the village). Others, though, participate in forms of sociality that are further removed from those of their forebears and become advocates of values seen to contravene to customary ways. Some stretch family relationships away from those governed by mutual obligations and inter-dependency and tend to favour their nuclear family (even when they are living in extended family households) and their conjugal households. The topic of money surfaces time and again: research interlocutors explain that life in town is expensive and that it is wiser to limit as much as possible the size of the household. Women say they want to reserve whatever money is available for the school fees of their children or for other projects they may have: buying a piece of land; building a house in town, or back in the village. Though not always possible because of financial and social constraints, the nuclear family household has become the preferred model of urban residence, particularly among the upper middle class and the elite. It is also acts as a quasi trope of urban living, though most urban dwellers know well how difficult it would be to run a double income nuclear household without the contribution of young members of the extended family that provide childcare and perform household chores (Jourdan 2017). The adoption of these lifestyles and ideologies, however, leave town-dwellers vulnerable to challenges by their



village folks: how can one be an urbanite and yet remain a Kwara'ae, a Rannonggan, or a Bellonese?<sup>7</sup> How does one belong to the larger world (here, the town) yet remain connected to, and most importantly, worthy of, the local scene (the village) defined in ethnic and clanic terms (see also Alasia 1987)? How can people be urbanites and still fulfill their obligations to members of their lineage who remain in their home village? How can they cultivate the interests of their nuclear family and all the while remain loyal to the *wantok* system—the network of mutual obligations that links together members of the same ethno-linguistic group who reside in town, often in restrictive ways?

Within these networks, where issues relating to customary ways such as brideprice and compensation are endless objects of discussion, negotiation and arbitration, ancestral languages are the primary medium. Yet many young urbanites have lost touch with their ancestral language. For an ever-increasing number of young people born and raised in town, the moral and social world of the village is less important than it is for their parents. Speaking only Pijin and English, they define their identities in reference to urban lifestyles rather than a rural place. All these tensions and transformations come to the fore in the institution of brideprice.

#### BRIDEPRICE IN TOWN

For many urbanites, brideprice has become a symbol of Malaita, even though brideprice exchange also takes place in many other parts of the country. Indeed, Berg has convincingly shown that Malaitans in Honiara, who represent a significant proportion of the town's population,<sup>8</sup> use brideprice as an ethnic marker in this multiethnic and multicultural city (Berg 2000:140). It could even be argued that brideprice acts as an

identity marker more than a marker of affinity. We contend that urbanites at times cultivate minute cultural differences to reinforce their own singularity in a sea of people who are, overall, very similar. Brideprice is one of the ways they do so.

Brideprice exchanges in town are very similar to their rural counterparts. Once young people have decided to marry, this sets in motion a series of exchanges of goods, food and money between the groom's and bride's families. These exchanges usually include different stages, each recognizing different moments of the relationships between the two families, and in some cases, take place throughout the life of the couple.<sup>9</sup> We will not go into details here, but summarize the three most important phases of brideprice exchanges.

In phase 1, the groom and his kin assemble the necessary goods for the brideprice. In most communities this phase can last up to a year. In phase 2, the brideprice is transferred to the bride's kin representative, usually her father or another man of high status. This phase includes counter prestations on the part of the bride's family: this exchange 'seals' the marriage and makes it official. The transfer of the brideprice may take place immediately before or after the wedding feast but may also continue years later when children are born.<sup>10</sup> In phase 3, the bride's kin representative or her father distributes the brideprice among his own kin, according to a set of pre-existing obligations that bind him.

In the past, that is to say before colonization, the advent of Christianity and urbanization in the Solomon Islands, brideprice consisted mainly in currencies of shell valuables or necklaces of porpoise or dog teeth (Bennett 1987).<sup>11</sup> The main variables that affected the amount of brideprice given for a woman included the lineage she belonged

to, her intrinsic qualities, her reputation as a hard worker and her virginity. Decorum required that the family of the bride never set the value of the brideprice that was to be accepted for her, though a father might make it known that he had “spoken for” his daughter, meaning that any suitor should expect to pay a high brideprice for her hand. However, this practice is progressively changing. Some families now set a price for their ‘daughter’, ‘sister’ or ‘niece’.

Among urbanites, the value of brideprice appears now to be strongly linked to a new set of factors that include church affiliation,<sup>12</sup> the social standing of both families, pressures from rural and urban kin, the status and qualities of the bride, her ability to gain paid employment, her beauty, and the degree of insertion of the bride’s family into the urban mode of life. These considerations clearly involve criteria of female marriageability that are significantly different from what they were before, in a way that resonates with situations analyzed by Rosi and Zimmer-Tamakoshi (1993) and Spark (2011) in Papua New Guinea.

Throughout the areas where it is given, and even more so in Honiara, brideprice is increasingly influenced by monetization and capitalist markets. Nonetheless, the basis for establishing the appropriate amount of cash incorporated in brideprice remains linked to the amount of shell money being paid. Informants explained to us that, ideally, there should never be more cash in brideprice payments than shell money; and the reason for this is that the shell money ‘makes’ the marriage—legitimizes it and endows it with moral force. In some areas, such as in Kwaio mountain areas, as reported by Akin, money constitutes only a small part of brideprice, ‘believing [money] would undermine the legitimacy of the marriage’ (1999:114). This ties in with Kwaio views of shell money as

a key symbol of *kastom* and Kwaio autonomy. Among the LangaLanga, money should constitute only a small part of brideprice because it does not carry the moral weight that shell money has (Guo 2006). This appears to be markedly different from what is happening currently in Papua New Guinea (see for example Pickles 2017 who examines one example of a man who converts all brideprice items given into monetary values). However, individual practices often differ from this ideal of a corresponding value of shell money and cash in brideprice payments. As we will show presently, the inclusion of state money in brideprice has changed how people think about it. It has also affected the power relationship among people who contribute to it; for example, young people who now earn money can contribute to the brideprice given for their bride, or skip the payment altogether (see also Macintyre 2011 for Lihir). Some of our informants also report that people do not divulge the total amount of the brideprice they receive for their daughter so as to be able to keep the bulk of it, but also so as to be able to respect the limits on brideprice imposed by some churches. In addition, inflation in the size of brideprice in Honiara and in the rural areas affects the possibility for young people to get married.

The result is a practice that is increasingly diversified and that individuals appropriate when and if they can or wish to. The collaborative dimension that was once central to the gathering of a brideprice payment remains for the most part. But we will see that as marriages shift from being an alliance between groups to one between individuals, in Honiara particularly, the purposes and ideologies that sustain brideprice are changing. Yet, it remains important in the social life of many urban women, though at

times women both young and old embrace it, and at other times younger women vigorously debate it.

### BRIDEPRICE AND CONSTRAINTS ON YOUNG WOMEN'S LIVES

When they discuss brideprice, ethnographies of Solomon Islands typically emphasize exchange between groups and the reproduction of lineages. Brideprice is presented as the conduit that makes that reproduction legitimate and possible. This last point clearly puts brideprice in another realm: that of morality. Legitimacy speaks of control, and in this particular case control over the morality of the women both before and after marriage. In what follows, we analyze aspects of women's lives that are constrained by the moral weight and the obligations brideprice imposes on them, and how urban women construe these obligations and try to offset them.

#### **Brideprice and Sexual Autonomy**

In Honiara, though mores have relaxed over the years, much value is still attached to the virginity and chastity of a girl when she marries. The insistence on virginity predates the arrival of Christianity and it was strictly enforced by indigenous rules, particularly on Malaita (Bennett 1987). Ivens notes about the south of Malaita: 'At Sa'a, an affianced bride, if convicted of unchastity, might be strangled' (1972 [c1927]:87). Writing about the To'abaita in North Malaita, Hogbin (1939:47) explains that 'Premarital chastity is enjoined for both sexes' and that no man would dream of marrying a woman sexually compromised (ibid.:96). Sexual indiscretions affected the value of a girl's brideprice: 'Her bride-price is [...] reduced by more than half, and the exchanges of food are entirely dispensed with' (ibid.). Writing about the Kwara'ae, Burt (1988:78) explains that any

suspicion of premarital sex on the part of a girl ‘spoils her chances of marrying well and bringing her family a good brideprice, which in the past would have been a very large gift of shell money’.

In Honiara today, virginity and sexual propriety are still part of a general moral discourse of what a bride should be and how she should behave. Indeed, young girls are raised being told of the link between virginity and the brideprice that can be obtained for them. Buchanan et al. (2003) and Buchanan and Maebiru (2008) argue that the relationship between brideprice and the moral status of the bride is undeniable. In fact the amount of brideprice sought for a girl is directly linked to her reputation as a virgin. Parents impose curfews on their daughters and enforce them strictly. Not only is it dangerous for a young woman to walk alone after dark in some parts of Honiara, but her reputation may be tarnished by her doing so. Jourdan was told of a young girl belonging to an important Malaitan lineage who, in Honiara in 2013, was severely beaten by her father after it was reported to him that she had been seen that night in the company of a boy. The father assumed that the girl was compromised and that her sullied reputation would prevent him from getting the very high brideprice he was expecting.

In an article on the changing Melanesian family, Zorn (2010) provides another interesting example. A high brideprice had been given for a bride on the belief that she was a virgin when in fact she was not (in this case she was clearly pregnant by another man). The groom’s father took the bride’s father to court. The magistrate explained that honesty about virginity was a quintessential Malaitan custom and ruled that the brideprice and all the expenses linked to the wedding had to be reimbursed to the groom’s father (see *John To’ofilu v Oimae* reported in Zorn 2010). Both examples show that the sexual

life of young women is seriously curtailed by the expectation that a higher brideprice will be obtained if the girl is a virgin.

This relationship of virginity to brideprice is also indicated by the smaller amounts paid for divorcees or widows. Brideprice payments are less expensive when women marry a second time. These marriages are often described as ‘bargain marriages’ (Jourdan and Black 2017). Kwaio men have told Akin that they married a widow partly for this reason (personal communication April 2018)<sup>13</sup>.

Informants explain that brideprice is what gives legitimacy to the children born to a couple and this is why it must be paid. This argument is linked to the moral weight of shell money Akin (1999) and Guo (2006) write about. Until the time that brideprice is paid, children cannot be claimed by the lineage of their father, nor can they inherit from their fathers (let alone inherit his land), even if both parents live together and raise the children together. The issue of legitimacy of the children and its relationships to brideprice is an added burden to the women whose sexuality outside of marriage is truly controlled. As noted by M. Strathern for Papua New Guinea (1972), brideprice ‘marks out the exclusive rights between a husband and his wife’ (1972:41). This is true also for Vanuatu (Servy, this volume) and for Solomon Islands. In case of adultery committed by the wife, and if the marriage collapses because of it, the brideprice (under certain conditions) may have to be returned to her in-laws. And even at a late stage in her married life a woman’s adultery will be severely reprimanded. The moral bond created by brideprice translates here into a financial bond. A young wife is under pressure from her own family, who may not want to return the brideprice (that may already have been invested in someone else’s marriage and know that they will get a smaller brideprice

should she remarry). She is also pressured by her in-laws, who chaperone her carefully and will ask for compensation, or for the return of the brideprice, if something in her behavior calls for it. Brideprice is thus felt by women as a lien that binds them. Only when they are older and have had ‘enough’ children can they feel that they have met their part of the deal. The situation is similar in New Caledonia. For example, an older woman from New Caledonia who has had many children told Nicolas (2012) that she has paid back her brideprice with her children and her work, and that she could now leave her husband without jeopardizing the brideprice received by her family years before. In fact, in the Solomons a return of brideprice typically will not be demanded in such cases (see below).

### **Brideprice and the Reproductive Autonomy of Women**

Here, given the importance of children in Solomon Islands families, and keeping in mind that the status of a woman is often derived from her being a mother, we define reproductive autonomy not only in terms of women’s capacity to control the number and timing of pregnancies, but also of their ability and right to raise their children. Some scholars working in Africa such as Dodo (1998) and Horne, Dodo and Dodo (2013) have claimed that brideprice payments decrease women’s reproductive autonomy. We have no extensive data to make a similar claim, but in Solomon Islands, of paramount importance in brideprice transactions is the expectation that the bride will bear children for her husband (see also Servy 2017 for Vanuatu). Being a parent is a life goal for many Solomon Islanders, as Dureau (1993:31) explains. Men give brideprice in part so that they can have children. Scott (2007:256), writing about Makira, quotes one interlocutor as saying:



A father buys children with strung shell valuables. Why does a man buy children? Because the male is a dry tree; he can't make his group longer. So he buys a woman and he buys children [with the bride-price]. He buys a woman because he wants children [...].

Writing about Kwara'ae in 1994, Burt confirmed the importance of children in a marriage: 'The bridewealth may have to be returned if she [the bride] gives cause for divorce because she is barren, unfaithful or otherwise incompatible with her husband' (Burt 1994:40). Oftentimes, husbands are the ones who decide on the number of children the couple will have. In 2016, a very pregnant, young rural-based Kwaio woman explained to Jourdan that she was expecting her fifth child. When asked if this would be her last one, she responded that only her 'boss'—her husband—knew the answer to that.

In-laws pressure young wives to have children early in the marriage, and women who take longer to get pregnant are often despised. About the Lau in the early 1970s, Köngäs-Maranda (1974:192) writes that women were not allowed to go back to their natal village up until the time that they had given birth to at least two children. In some places women may also face severe physical threats. In Lau again, 'A man may beat up his wife for example for not becoming pregnant or for not bearing sons [...]' (ibid.:193). Back in 1987, some women in Honiara told Jourdan of having been beaten by their husbands and threatened by their in-laws because they did not get pregnant quickly enough or at all (Jourdan 1987). However, Akin (private communication April 2018) explains that 'in Kwaio, a man beating his wife for this reason would not typically be tolerated by her family'.

The focus on virginity just discussed is also a way to control women's reproductive life within *kastom*, as Buchanan and Maebiru argue, but also 'within the religious ideologies that support gender inequalities and stress the control of female sexuality, reproduction and ultimately their desires' (2008:230). For people originating from areas where brideprice is given, wanting children and needing to pay for them beforehand creates tensions. An unmarried young woman with child is obviously not a virgin and the brideprice given for her, if it is demanded, will be lower. Brideprice is clearly the arbiter of reproductive life for women from these areas: if no brideprice has been paid, NO children should be born; if children are born when no brideprice has been paid, they are considered illegitimate, 'children of the road' (*pikinin blo rod*); if brideprice has been paid, children MUST be born. Yet, we observe in Honiara that a greater number of young women get pregnant as a way to get married quickly to the man of their choice. A woman who does not want brideprice to be paid for her may opt to get pregnant so that she can be married off quickly after compensation is paid by her lover (or his family) to her parents. The girl's behavior triggers much lament on the part of her family, and much gossip on the part of neighbors, but it is quickly forgotten once the child is born.

The link between brideprice and high birth rates is not clearly established. Results of the national census of 2009 (the latest census figures available) indicate that the island of Malaita has the highest fertility rate in the country, with 5.6 children per woman, whereas multiethnic Honiara has a fertility rate of 3.3 children per woman (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2012:10). Surely, with all the other provinces in the country exhibiting higher fertility rates than Honiara, ethnicity alone (and brideprice in particular) cannot explain these differences. Our partial and impressionistic data on this

matter seem to indicate a link between the number of children that women have and their level of education, employment, and length of residence in Honiara. The upper middle-class young women of Jourdan's corpus, who generally value children highly, desire to limit the number of children they will have. Three is typically presented as the ideal number. In practice, however, they often have little choice since family planning in the form of permanent sterilization must be approved by their husbands (see Servy 2017 for Vanuatu). But many women, particularly those in harmonious marriages, manage to convince their husbands of the wisdom of having fewer children in an urban environment where the cost of living is high.

In Honiara, we often hear women explain that brideprice curtails their ability to gain custody of their children if they divorce. Customary and Common Law coexist and make it possible for husbands to claim custody of their children if brideprice has been paid. In the 1980s and 1990s, Jourdan collected testimonies of urban women who felt trapped in a bad marriage by *kastom* and religion, and saw no way out of it, convinced as they were that if they divorced they would lose the custody of their children. However, things are changing. According to the Guardianship of Minors Act (1961), the welfare of the child is paramount in cases of guardianship. In an article on the right of the child in Solomon Islands, Corrin (2016:277) explains that in at least four cases presented to the High Court in Honiara, 'customary rights were subordinate to the welfare of the children'. In 2016, Zai Pabulu and Jourdan surveyed 2013–2015 custody records in the Honiara's magistrates' court, and their findings confirmed this trend. Out of 23 cases of custody and child maintenance presented to the court, the welfare principle worked in favor of the mother in 17 cases (custody = 11 cases; maintenance = 6 cases), and in

favour of the father for only 4 cases (one on the grounds that brideprice had been paid). Two cases remained unresolved. That said, because the payment of brideprice was not recorded systematically for all the cases it is impossible to ascertain, based on these records, whether, or the degree to which, the welfare principle takes precedence over customary law when brideprice is paid. In any case, women now use the courts to argue their case against customary law if they feel they are in the right. Many other urban women do not seek redress in court for diverse reasons that include intimidation from in-laws and husbands, pressures from churches that uphold the sanctity of Christian marriages, insufficient financial resources, and a lack of emotional support.

### **Brideprice and Personal Autonomy**

Though young people in Honiara typically marry for love, as do young people in rural areas, brideprice may at times interfere with marriage. Two situations may affect a woman's ability to marry: if she objects to brideprice, as some women at times do, and if a high brideprice is demanded for her. When brideprice demands are too high (as is the case in some cultural groups such as the Lau), and if men and their families cannot find the necessary shell valuables and money, young people cannot marry the person they want. Gegeo reports (personal communication June 2017) that many young men in Kwara'ae (Malaita) cannot get married because of the inflation in brideprice, and that some families do get financially strained because of it. Asked what will happen if the brideprice cannot be met by their suitor's family, young women told Jourdan: 'We stay like that' (*mifala stap olsem*), meaning: we do not marry.

The increase of brideprice is not new. Brideprice has been inflating for decades, on Malaita since at least 1927 when Ivens (1972 [c1927]:46-47) remarked on it. Some

people tried to limit its increase, but to no avail until some Christian churches imposed limits under threat of excommunication (Akin 1999; Bennett 1987). Others opt for a ‘bargain marriage’ with a divorcee or a widow because this is all they can afford. This may explain why so many young Malaitan men told us that they dream of marrying someone from an area where brideprice is not expected or required. As Akin rightly points out (private communication May 2018) ‘one reason young men find brideprice payments so burdensome is that they have not maintained their connection and obligations to their larger kin groups at home that would, in the past, and still now, help them pay large brideprices’. This is, in some ways, a result of the individualism of town life conflicting with group-loyalties.

Elders demanding high brideprices can be strategic in that it allows them to control who marries who. In some cases, parents raise the amount of brideprice inordinately so as to ‘politely’ refuse a suitor they do not accept. For instance, in 2008, Priscilla wanted to marry Gerry, a man with a reputation as a ‘wild’ and ‘noisy’ young man. In the eyes of Priscilla’s parents, he was obviously unsuitable for their daughter and they set a very high brideprice so as to dissuade him but Gerry agreed to paying it. In response, Priscilla’s parents reneged and asked for still more money, but Gerry agreed again. Every time they raised the brideprice he agreed to pay it. Both Gerry and Priscilla wanted to do things according to *kastom* and marry with her parents’ blessings, and indeed she refused to marry otherwise. Gerry eventually lost heart, however, and abandoned their marriage plans. Told about the situation, Marlene, one of our informants, approved of Priscilla’s steadfastness: ‘We are obeying the culture; the culture, everyone abides by it [...]. Everybody recognizes culture; and culture endures.’<sup>14</sup>

Another case is that of Donna, a well-educated 23-year-old who was to marry Paul, a man from Vanuatu she had met at the university in Suva. Her widowed mother Suri wanted a reasonable brideprice, but Suri's in-laws, who had given brideprice for her a generation before, stipulated a high brideprice on the grounds that Paul was a well-educated foreigner, had money (they assumed), and would take Donna away to live in Port-Vila. To the family, this last point was a major problem: they truly felt that they would be losing Donna, losing her affection and companionship and would never see her children. They hoped that the high brideprice asked would discourage the young man and that he would withdraw. Arguments ensued between Suri (Donna's mother) and her in-laws: Suri wanted to display respect for her in-laws by agreeing with their high demands, but she also thought that a high price went against the spirit of brideprice. Furthermore, she wanted to do well by her daughter and allow her to marry the man she wanted. In the end, after much negotiation, a lower price was set and the marriage took place.

More constraining overall is the discourse about brideprice that stresses women's responsibilities as wives and mothers, and obligations to their in-laws and the community. Brideprice transforms a girl into a spouse who will, from the moment of her wedding, work for the benefit of her in-laws; she will bear children who will belong to her husband's lineage and she will work for them. Many brideprice ceremonies on Malaita, for example among the Lau (Kongäs-Maranda 1974) and the To'abaita (Hogbin 1939), seek to reinforce this point. One of the first tasks of the new wife upon arriving at her new house is, to the watching pleasure of the community, to sweep her courtyard of garbage that her in-laws have discarded there beforehand. We have witnessed this ritual

many times in town. The message is clear: from now on, all the bride's efforts will be directed to the benefit of her husband and his family.

The capacity to work hard is one of the most desirable qualities in a woman in Solomon Islands. Pollard (2000) argues that before her marriage a girl who hopes to secure the favour of her prospective husband's family must prove her ability to work hard. After her marriage, 'she must work still harder in order to establish and enhance her family's reputation and to avoid shame and social condemnation...' (2000:5). One of our research interlocutors recently told us of her disappointment with the new wife of a relative. She said the woman was useless because she was always sick:

She is not fulfilling her obligations. They paid for her but she does not work, does not cook, does not have children, is always sick. This thing we paid for is always sick. She is a bad deal.<sup>15</sup>

The value of the woman, referred to as a thing, seems to be measured only by what the brideprice is supposed to secure: work, children, food. It is as a producer and reproducer that she finds grace in the eyes of her in-laws. This quote seems to indicate that whatever personal qualities she may have is irrelevant. We take it with a grain of salt, though. In the same conversation, the interlocutor in question was expressing frustration because the young couple was making incessant demands for financial support, without offering any reciprocation. In general, the personal qualities of the daughter-in-law (friendliness, affability, respect) are not negligible at all. They are considered essential to her becoming a full member of her new family. A good daughter in-law is loyal in her affections to her

in-laws. Complaining about her work ethic is at times a way to express frustration about her demeanor and attitude towards themselves and their inability to control her.

It has been argued that the incorporation of cash into brideprice payments has changed relationships within the family. Zorn (2010:107) says that the monetization of brideprice has contributed to lowering women's status: 'Instead of being the key to the relationship between two families, women now are viewed as servants whose work and childbearing capacities have been purchased.' Our data show that in some families women do indeed feel as though they are forever 'condemned' to work for their in-laws and that they can be exploited by them or mistreated by their husband on the pretext that brideprice was paid. In town, productive capacities include paid employment, or participation in the informal economy, and are not limited to household labour and biological reproduction. Cash earned by women greatly contributes to family budgets. However, public discourse, corroborated by our data, forcefully condemns the mistreatment of wives.<sup>16</sup> People argue that husbands who mistreat their wives misunderstand the purpose of brideprice. Nevertheless, some young men have told us that they are indeed buying a wife when they give brideprice, and that they 'own' her and can do whatever they want with her.

Most young people need their family members' help to gather brideprice. In this way brideprice indebts young couples to family or lineage members who have contributed to it. This indebtedness limits their financial autonomy and diverts money from other important budgetary items such as school fees for their children. Aside from pressuring young women into having many children, some in-laws intervene in marital disputes, impose their physical presence in the house for long periods of time, and



interfere in almost all the decisions that concern the couple and their family. Urbanites, both men and women, tell of the burden of demands by in-laws who pressure their urban families for money, for children, and so forth. One complaint we heard most often was about rural family members who pay lengthy visits and expect to be fed and lodged indefinitely and given pocket money. In a town where, as people say, ‘we eat with money’ (*mifala kaekae long selen*), as opposed to ‘we eat from our garden’ (*mifala kaekae long gaden*), even one additional mouth to feed is a heavy burden, given the meagre income of most urban families. Talking about visiting in-laws who stay unduly, Linda said: ‘They do not buy food, they do not give money: it makes it hard moneywise because John (her husband) is the only one who works’.<sup>17</sup> She added: ‘Because they paid brideprice for me they expect me to do everything for them’.<sup>18</sup> While rules of mandatory generosity apply to the urban couple, including demand-sharing (see Maggio 2017 for an analysis of demand-sharing among urban Kwara’ae in Honiara), they are understood to apply more specifically to the wife, due to the brideprice paid for her. This represents a major transition: In-laws and husbands seek to control women (and not simply land through women’s labour on it) and their productive and reproductive labour by curtailing their sexuality and the product of their work.<sup>19</sup>

How do young women respond to their in-laws’ pressures to supply material goods on the pretext that brideprice has been paid? Though respect and generosity towards one’s in-laws and extended family (and the community) is recognized as a paramount virtue of a wife, its effect on urban women is mitigated by the fact that urbanites are increasingly invested in their nuclear rather than extended families, particularly if the latter are village-based (Jourdan 1987, 2017). But women must tread

carefully, because refusing to share one's means and possessions with family members is seen as bad form; it contravenes to the ethos of generalized reciprocity among members of a residential hamlet or family. If they do not respond to the material and financial requests of their in-laws, women risk being accused of selfishness, a socially reprehensible sin, and seeing their reputation damaged. Unable to fend off her mother in-laws' demand-sharing requests, Lila's strategy was to hide in her sister's house all the consumer goods she had bought since the last visit of her in-laws, and to explain to them that she hoped to have things to give away for the next visit. She did this with the support of her husband, who also felt the drain caused by incessant demands for money or goods. The husband was not the initiator of the subterfuge, but went along with it and thus was able to manage his own relationship with his parents. The then young couple felt that they had no other recourse but to hide their belongings in order to be able to keep them. We feel that this is yet another example of the strengthening of the nuclear family and of the couple as a social unit.

In view of the moral debts incurred by the young couples married with brideprice, it can be argued that the custom curtails the financial well-being of the girl and also of her new family. This is why some fathers, like Matteo, refuse to demand brideprice for their daughters; they do not want to bind them with a series of debts:

No, because the way I look at it, brideprice is not a good thing. When the boy's father came to see me, I told him he could have her for free. I did not want her to have debts, not even food debts. I did not want the father-in-law to be able to go and see her and ask her for money. I did not want the man who took her to mistreat her. I do not like brideprice. It is not good.<sup>20</sup>

Matteo associates brideprice with in-laws control over the bride, which in turn compromises her financial autonomy.

To honour custom without becoming indebted to their elders and acquire control over their lives, some young urban couples take more radical measures. Some opt to pay brideprice on their own. This is not a new phenomenon but it is becoming more common. Hogbin explains that as early as 1939 young men who returned to North Malaita from the plantations with cash and wished to free themselves from the control of their elders bought themselves the *tafuli'ae* (shell money in north Malaitan vernacular languages) required to pay brideprice (Hogbin 1939). Young people could participate in one another's brideprice payments and get wives without becoming indebted to elders (Bennett 1987; Hogbin 1939:168).<sup>21</sup> In 1991, Jourdan recorded in her fieldnotes that some men borrowed brideprice money from a bank rather than rely on their family's help. This practice goes on today as can be read in Maggio's transcripts of his interviews with some of his Kwara'ae informants in Honiara (2014) and as evidenced by the story of Peter. A young man from Roviana and a young professional, Peter borrowed brideprice money from the bank when he decided to marry Martina, a young woman from Malaita. Both are well-educated members of the upper middle-class. Martina's father, though socially prominent, had decided that Peter could give what he wanted. He gave one *bakiha* (a valuable from Roviana) and four *tafuli'ae* (valuables from Malaita that he bought from LangaLanga vendors at the market). Though he disapproves of brideprice, Peter decided to honor Martina by giving it for her. She wanted it to be paid: she argued that brideprice established a strong bond between families and that it served as an identity

symbol for groups. In the same interview, Peter told Jourdan that he will not demand brideprice for his own daughters when they get married.

When Ronald and Roberta decided to get married in 2008, Resina, Roberta's mother (a widow), asked for 20 *tafuli'ae* and SB\$15,000 (about US\$1,884) for her. This price was very high, knowing that the median salary in Honiara is SB\$11,888 (US \$1,493) and the mean is SB\$22,453 (US\$ 2,820) (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office 2015, Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2012-2013, p. 57, Table 23). To her horrified daughter, Resina explained that once married, all of her work would go to her husband's family and that she wanted to get back some of the money she had invested in Roberta's education.<sup>22</sup> Roberta responded that her own work as a highly ranked civil servant would benefit her own family and not that of her husband and that she was ready to lend her husband some money towards her own brideprice. Ronald refused any help, however, and negotiated a lower price with Roberta (10 *tafuli'ae* and SB\$10,000 (US\$1,256). He then went to the bank and borrowed the cash, bought the required shell necklaces at the market and paid the demanded brideprice. 'He does not want to owe anything to anyone'<sup>23</sup>, Roberta explained. But though she complained about the high price her mother demanded, she felt that it had to be paid:

I want to respect the tradition. I do not want to be embarrassed because he did not pay for me. It is a lack of respect for the tradition, it is a lack of respect for the family.<sup>24</sup>

This strategy can be analyzed in two ways: one can see as the result of young people getting increasingly estranged from their family network, and because of it, they are not

wanting or are not able to ask for help. Another reason is the desire to be fully autonomous. Young men who go this route signal the shift in the balance of power between generations: the young urban men, if they are educated and have a good job, can honor *kastom* without strings attached. Yet this strategy could backfire. Zimmer-Tamakoshi explains (1998:205) that Gende husbands, having ‘paid’ alone the brideprice demanded for their wives, may have the impression that they are entitled to do as they please with their income and in their household; the couple no longer works together to repay the debt, and the wife is now fully under the husband’s control. The same is true in Honiara, in some measure. In other words, when the many family connections galvanized by brideprice are waived or refused, a wife can lose a crucial support network and find herself on her own to deal with her husband’s demands.

In some cases, and if they have worked and saved money, women may contribute to their own brideprice. Doing so gives them leverage in their household and allows them some say on the number of children they are prepared to have and on the couple’s and family’s affairs. For instance, Julianne, a 40-year-old professional woman, explained to us that she had insisted on contributing to her own brideprice so as to not be obligated to her husband and his family. She said she reminds him of that every time he tries to boss her around, and in order to limit the number of children she is prepared have. Her husband is a well educated professional who accepted his wife’s contribution as a token of her commitment to the marriage.

Among our informants, Kati, a 19-year-old pre-university student, wants to be able to discuss with her father and brothers what an appropriate brideprice for her will be. She wants to have a voice in the decision so that she will not feel like an animal that can

be bought. Or, as Julia said: 'I am not like a boat that can be sold' (*Mi no sip for salem ia*)<sup>25</sup>. Still, other women seek to get married without brideprice in order to escape the control of their in-laws (see also Macintyre 2011 for Lihir), and at times that involves eloping with one's lover and creating a *fait accompli*.

What did other women we talked to think about this behavior? When asked about these examples, many were shocked, and asked whether the young couples were signaling that they were rejecting their own families. Their actions were considered an insult. Dora, aged 45 and a mother, said: 'It looks to me as if these two have no respect for anyone. Who are the parents? These two think about themselves only.'<sup>26</sup> Marlene, age 40 and also a mother, spoke of brideprice as the foundation of culture; not paying it would be tantamount to abandoning one's history and heritage. People who behave in that way, it is asserted, are excluding themselves from the family community:

I think that what you are talking about is not right. Because after all we are connected, we are together, we gain relationships through culture. This is the foundation of culture. But I think that this is a new tradition that is arriving and influences our culture. It happens very often in Honiara. And we look at these people as if they are not important members of our society. Do you understand? There is no honor in this type of marriage.'<sup>27</sup>

While some young women, as we have seen, feel that they have the ability to inflect brideprice and to reduce the constraints it places on their lives, other urban women speak of brideprice as a *kastom* over which they have no control. When we asked 25-year-old Celina what she thought of the brideprice that was paid for her, her 50-year-old mother

Dafua, a Kwara'ae woman married to a Kwaio man, quickly interjected: 'It does not matter what she thinks, or whether she likes it or not; the Kwaio men love *baani'au* [shell-money] too much.'<sup>28</sup> Dafua's daughter Celina simply said: "It is the *kastom*" (*Kastom naia*). Asked what would happen if a girl did not want brideprice to be paid for her, 19-year-old student Kati answered:

It does not matter what she wants, the others have a say over her. Parents, uncles, people like that, on her mother's side, but specially her father and brothers and uncles.<sup>29</sup>

Some women insisted that a substantial amount be given for them, and would be shamed if they did not fetch a good price (see also Henry and Vavrova, this issue, for Papua New Guinea). Indeed, they equated the amount of brideprice given for them with their social standing and worth, and thus corroborated Whiteman's remark on Isabel women's reaction to the lowering of brideprice by the missions: 'They perceived it as an attempt by the Mission to devalue their worth' (1983:225). For example, Janet, a well-educated and well-travelled 31-year-old young woman born into a prominent family, was shocked to learn, years after the fact, that her brideprice had only been SB\$5,000 (around US\$628). Not only did she consider this amount unworthy of her, but she was afraid that the low amount would undermine her own status in the eyes of her in-laws.

## CONCLUSION

Interested as we were in the place of brideprice in the life of Malaitan women in Honiara, we have identified and analyzed three main ways in which it interacts with, shapes, and constrains their lives. In this quest, we could not ignore men since they figure

prominently in women's readings of brideprice and as women's takes on the practice are greatly influenced by their interactions with men. Neither could we ignore the roles of families in the reproduction of brideprice as a mechanism for social control over the young. Thus our study of urban brideprice confirmed the power relationships that still exist within families, and between generations, genders and locales.

We have shown that urbanites in Honiara, men and women alike, have different and sometimes conflicting readings of brideprice. This diversity of points of view is reminiscent of Filer's findings in his 1985 analysis of newspapers readers' comments about brideprice in Papua New Guinea. But most of the time the views expressed by urbanites resonate with those of their rural communities. We should not be surprised, since brideprice sustains, and is sustained by, an ideology of alliance and morality resting on social and mutual obligations between individuals, families and lineages. The social relationships that we observe in town, though they have become translocal and though they tend increasingly towards individualism, are still very much anchored in ideologies of the family that are rooted in the village.

Though a dominant 'brideprice cultural script' endures, similar to what we described in section 2, this script has diversified. Its various iterations represent people's different understanding of its place in their life. While some claim that the practice of brideprice exchange is akin to selling a daughter and demeans women (Kati), others argue that it celebrates the social value and the virtue of women (Janet). Brideprice's proponents argue that it helps cement families and is therefore valuable (Suri). Opponents object that it harks back to the social world of the 'village' that they seek to escape. Still others offer it as proof that tradition perseveres (Roberta). Others offer no opinion, and



simply accept brideprice as a part of *kastom* (Celina). Some urbanites complain that it gives too much of control to elders and kin over the younger generation, even when elders live in distant villages (Matteo). As Hogbin (1939:48) noted early on, ‘economic dependence is a powerful sanction for obedience to authority and nowhere is it more in evidence than with regards to marriage’. Other people praise the integrative nature of brideprice payment.

Some participants complain about the contemporary inflation of brideprice—up to SB\$30,000 (US\$3,768) in some urban families—while others seek higher amounts as a marker of their social standing, or as a return on what they see as an ‘investment’, the most important being a return for the costs of educating their daughter (Resina). But some daughters object to high brideprice being paid for them on the grounds that the amount should be more reasonable (Roberta). In the background of this discourse we find a concern for what Faugère (2002:4; cited by Païni this issue), writing about Maré Island in New Caledonia, refers to as the ‘*étiquette du juste don*’. In other words, the brideprice should be appropriate and fair. Here the symbolic dimension of brideprice matters more than its amount.

We have also shown that young women are not passive in the social game of brideprice exchange, though they have no official voice or role to play. Because they cannot jettison the practice, those who object to its constraints on their lives have no recourse but to try to mitigate its effects (see Wardlow 2006). With regards to sexuality, options involve hiding their romantic or sexual activities from their families, or even getting pregnant or eloping to force a marriage. The cell phone proves to be a boon to such endeavours since it allows discretion at all times (see also Andersen 2013; Lipset

2017; Servy 2013; Taylor 2016). With regards to reproductive constraints, some of the women we spoke with were able to enlist their husband in a decision to limit the number of children they would have, advancing as a reason the high cost of living in Honiara. An increasing number of women do not hesitate to go to court to seek custody of their children in the case of divorce, even though brideprice was paid for the marriage. Finally, in terms of personal autonomy, the range of options women take includes trying to lower brideprice amounts and, in some cases, borrowing money from the bank to contribute to their own brideprice. It remains to be seen whether what matters more for the young women is to escape the control of the elders, and of the men in particular, or to express their social autonomy.

Far from being confusing, these different takes on, and practices of, brideprice reveal transformations in the ways of conceiving marriage and family relations. They find their sources in, and expose, the increasing social and ethnic diversity and complexity in Honiara. The seeds of change were present even before urbanization (Bennett 1987; Hogbin 1939; Ivens 1972 [c1927]), as we explained above. But with the development of Honiara as a complex ethnic and social world, the dominant cultural scripts governing brideprice are debated and at times challenged. Chief among these changes are the transformations of the principles of mutual obligation that bind members of lineages and clans among the urban crowd.

How can we explain all these changes? Certainly, geographical and social distances from the world of the village represent interstitial spaces similar to those Bhabha (1994) wrote about and which here provide opportunities for change on different levels. One of these 'spaces' is the growing importance of the nuclear family as the

preferred urban model of the household among those who can afford to live in such an arrangement, both socially and financially (Jourdan 1987, 2017; Jourdan and Black 2017). Rents are expensive in Honiara and people often pool their resources to share housing. In many families we worked with, members of the immediate family circle become the foremost beneficiaries of the energies and finances it produces and expands, to the detriment of lineage and clan members who may very well be living in the same households (see Goberman-Hill 1990; Jourdan 1996; Maggio 2014). In the process the family is redefined more narrowly. We can see traces of this in the kinship terminology of Pijin (see Jourdan 2000; Maggio 2014).

The individualisation of brideprice is also facilitated by the fact that urbanites have, proportionately, greater access to employment than do their rural family members, and thus to the means to pay brideprice on their own. Some men are thus more readily able to contribute to the brideprice for their wives than their fathers ever were (see Panoff 1978). This diminishes the power of the village-based elders and of their urban counterparts, as financial and cultural powers are shifting to the young adults of the urban middle class (Friedman 2002; Jourdan 2007). Urban women, when they are wage earners, have now the possibility to become active players in brideprice and to assert their financial and moral autonomy.

We also need to recognize the importance of other cultural models of marriage present in town. Not necessarily those practiced by expatriates, but also those practiced by Solomon Islanders originating from areas where brideprice is either not paid or is limited. Cultural contact, as we explained earlier, is vibrant in Honiara, and so are interethnic marriages. Along with urbanization, one finds in some social circles a concern

for modernity that includes the lessening and redefinition of the importance of *kastom* on social life and leads to discussion of brideprice in the social sphere and to its redefinition.

Finally, we need to account for a shift in marriage away from being an alliance between social groups toward being a partnership between individuals. We observe that companionate marriage, which is on the rise, is a form of alliance that is compatible with the value of personal autonomy that is developing in town, particularly for women. This change was already being commented upon from Papua New Guinea in the early 1990s by Marksbury (1993) and Rosi and Zimmer Tamakoshi (1993) and more recently by Spark (2011). These days, ideologies of marriage focus on the young couple getting married as much as on their families allying. Although, following Gregory (1982), we argue that marriage, and here brideprice, constructs social groups and persons, the changes we analyze in this paper show that this construction is reconceptualized around the nuclear family, a social group that is narrower, and around the individual.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research for this paper was made possible by the people in Honiara who, gracefully and patiently, answered Jourdan's questions. It is impossible to name them all here, and we hope that they will recognize their voices and opinions in this paper. We thank them warmly. Thanks are due also to the Ministry of Education in Honiara for granting the research permit that allowed Jourdan to carry her research, the staff of the National Museum and National Library for facilitating research in their midst and for their efficiency and numerous kindnesses. Thanks also to Social Sciences Research Council of Canada, grant no. 435-2014-2128, for sponsoring the research. We are particularly

grateful to Nathan Bond and Zai Pabulu who collected data for the ‘Bridewealth Revisited’ project in 2015 and 2016. Previous versions of this paper were presented at the ESFO meeting in Munich in July 2017 and at the Solomon Islands National University in 2019; we thank the participants for their questions and suggestions. Our sincere thanks to David Akin and Karen Sykes for their generous reading, comments and insights on this paper.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we opt to use the Pijin term *braedpraes* (brideprice) as it is used locally to cover the semantic field of bridewealth (that puts emphasis on exchange between families) and the semantic field of brideprice (that puts emphasis on the commodification of that exchange). For discussion of this contrast see Jorgensen 1993; Jolly 1994; Wardlow 2006; Sykes 2013).

<sup>2</sup> This paper makes use of data gathered by Nathan Bond and Christine Jourdan as part of the “Bridewealth Revisited Project” in 2015 and 2016 (32 recorded interviews with men and women between the age of 21 and 76 belonging to 3 generations of the same family), as well as data gathered on brideprice in Honiara by Jourdan in 1997 (18 interviews). These data are complemented by participant observation by Jourdan in Solomon Islands over a 30-year period. We are grateful to the Solomon Islands Government for its authorization to carry out the research and to the research participants for their patience and generosity. This paper was presented at SINU in Honiara on May 29 2019.

<sup>3</sup> In her PhD thesis on the Baruya of Papua New Guinea, Malbrancke (2016) argues that there is no link between domestic violence and the commoditization of brideprice.

<sup>4</sup> This is also the case among the well-educated class of women in African urban centers (see Horne, Doodoo and Doodoo 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Most of the women we worked with range in age between 19 and 65 years old. They belong to what can be called the middle-class. They are typically well educated (though not all are), work either as professionals or middle or senior public servants, or are the wives or widows of successful men. The youngest ones were university students.

<sup>6</sup> Demand sharing is part of the obligatory mutual exchange system that binds people in close kin relationships throughout Melanesia. According to Peterson’s definition, in demand sharing, goods and services are exchanged ‘by taking rather than giving’ (Peterson 1993: 861). But spontaneous giving is also prevalent among close kin and friends.

<sup>7</sup> These are names of ethno-linguistic groups.

<sup>8</sup> According to the 2009 census, about 21,000 people reported being born on Malaita out a town population of 69,000. Of course, this does not include the children of Malaitan descent or of mixed marriages (Solomon Islands Statistics Office 2013).

<sup>9</sup> The most important ones are 1) the gift of shell money that engages the young couple, that is to say that ‘reserves a girl’ (*makem gele*); 2) ‘mother’s love’ (the gift of shell

---

money given to the bride's mother in recognition of the good care she took of her daughter); 3) the bridewealth, per se. There exists also various gifts from the groom's family throughout the women's life to celebrate the birth of her children or her hard work.

<sup>10</sup> Contrary to many African countries where brideprice can be paid in instalments, brideprice is usually presented in full at one time in the Solomon Islands.

<sup>11</sup> The LangaLanga people of Malaita have made it a specialty to make shell money that they sell in the country, and particularly in the markets of Honiara (Guo 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Some churches such as the South Sea Evangelical Church and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church are limiting acceptable brideprice to a maximum of SB\$5,000 (around US\$650 [exchange rate of January 28, 2019] plus corresponding shell money valuables (*tafuli`ae* or *baani`au*).

<sup>13</sup> The practice of paying less for a second bride is documented for Malaita and Ulawa as early as the 1920s (Ivens 1972 [c1927]:73; 1980 [c1930]: 101)

<sup>14</sup> *'Mifala nao obeem kalsa ia; evriwan abide by kalsa [...] evriwan rocognizes kalsa, an kalsa hem stap'*. (Marlene, August 2016)

<sup>15</sup> *'Hem no fulfilim obligations blong hem; Otta peem hem, batawea, hem no waka, no kuki, hem siki olowe. Samting mifala peem bat hemi siki oloway. She is a bad deal'* (Int #3, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Research on domestic violence in Honiara shows that people have diverse views on this issue (see Secretariat of the Pacific Community 2009).

<sup>17</sup> *'Otta no peem kaekae, otta no givim selen; hemi had lo saed lon selen, kos John nomoa waka.'* (Linda, April 2007)

<sup>18</sup> *'Lukim, from otta peem mi, otta laekem fo mi waka fo otta olowe'*. (Linda, April 2007)

<sup>19</sup> We are grateful to Karen Sykes for insights on this topic.

<sup>20</sup> *'Nomoa. From hao mi lukim, braedpraes hemi nogud. Taem dadi blong boe ia kam lukim mi, mi talem hem gele blong mi bae fri. Mi no laekem gele save kaon, no eni kaon long kaekae tu. Mi no laekem man ia bae kom ask selen long hem. Mi no laekem hasban save nogud long hem. Mi no laekem braedpraes. Hemi nogud'*. (Matteo, May 2015)

<sup>21</sup> See also Marksbury's discussion about Papua New Guinea (1993).

<sup>22</sup> In Solomon Islands, where access to cash income is still limited, tuition fees are an inordinately important part of the family budget. Parents spend a small fortune to educate a woman who, in the view of some parents, is now going to use that education to earn money for another family.

<sup>23</sup> *'Hem no laekem kaon long eniwan'*. (Roberta, August 2016)

<sup>24</sup> *'Mi laek honorem kastom. Nogud mi fil sem from hem no peem mi. Hem disrespek long kastom, direspekt long family'* (Roberta, August 2016)

<sup>25</sup> Contrast this position with women on Gela who back in 1901 had complained that a lack of brideprice rendered them like animals (Akin 2013:358, note 22)

<sup>26</sup> *'Long mi, luk olsem tufala no garem rispek fo eniwan nomoa ia. Hu nao parens? Olsem oketa folom on tinktink blon tufala seleva, ia?'* (Dora, August 2016)

<sup>27</sup> *'Bat tinktink blong mi long datfala kes hem wanfala niu kalsa wea hem kam insaed, hem influensim nao kalsa blong mifala olsem ia. Staka lo Honiara an mifala lukim okota olsem okota nating impotant insaed lo society blong mifala. Iu minim? Olsem, there is no honor insaed lo oketa mariage ia.'* (Marlene, August 2016)

---

<sup>28</sup> ‘Nomata wanem hem tinkim, les o nomoa, otta man lon Kwaio laekem baniau tumas (Dafua, April 2015)

<sup>29</sup> ‘Parens, evri ankol osem ia, saed blo mam blong hem, espesali bae dadi an brothers, ankol nomoa. (Kati, Sept. 2016)

## REFERENCES

- AKIN, D. 1993. *Negotiating Culture in East-Kwaio, Malaita, Solomon Islands*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Hawaii.
- . 1999. Cash and Shell Money in Kwaio, Solomon Islands. In D. Akin and J. Robbins (eds.), *Money and Modernity: State and Local Currencies in Melanesia*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, pp.103-30.
- . 2013. Colonialism, Maasina Rule and the Origins of Malaitan Kastom. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- ALASIA, S. 1987. The Case for ‘Brideprice.’ *O’O’ A Journal of Solomon Islands Studies* 1 (3): 59-67.
- ANDERSEN, B. 2013. Tricks, Lies, and Mobile Phones: ‘Phone Friend’ Stories in Papua New Guinea. *Culture, Theory and Critique* 54(3): 318-34.
- BENNETT, J. A. 1987. *Wealth of the Solomons: A History of a Pacific Archipelago, 1800-1978*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- BERG, C. 2000. *Managing Difference: Kinship, Exchange and Urban Boundaries in Honiara, Solomon Islands*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Bergen.
- BHABHA, H.K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Psychology Press.
- BRISON, K.J. 2017. Facebook and Urban Kinship in Suva, Fiji. *Le Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 144–145: 209-220.
- BUCHANAN-ARUWAFU, H., R. MAEBIRU and F. ARUWFU. 2003. Stiki Lole: Language and the Mediation of Desire in Auki, Malaita, Solomon Islands. *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 5(3): 219-35.
- BUCHANAN, H. and R. MAEBIRU. 2008. Smoke from Fire. Desire and Secrecy in Auki, Solomon Islands. In L. Butt and R. Eves (eds.). *Making Sense of AIDS. Culture, Sexuality, and Power in Melanesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp.168-86.
- BURT, B. 1988. Abu’a ‘i Kwara’ae: The Meaning of Tabu in a Solomon Islands Society. *Mankind* 18(2): 74-89.
- . 1994. *Tradition and Christianity: The Colonial Transformation of a Solomon Islands Society*. Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers.
- CORRIN, J. 2016. The Rights of the Child in Solomon Islands’ Plural Legal System. In O.C. Jancic (ed.). *The Rights of the Child in a Changing World: 25 years After the UN Convention on the Right of the Child*. Basel, Switzerland: Springer, pp. 263-292.
- DODOO, F.N.-A. 1998. Men Matter: Additive and Interactive Gendered Preference and Reproductive Behavior in Kenya. *Demography* 35:229-42.
- DUREAU, C. 1993. Nobody Asked the Mother: Women and Maternity on Simbo, Western Solomon Islands. *Oceania* 64: 18-35.

- 
- EVES, R. 2006. Exploring the Role of Men and Masculinities in Papua New Guinea in the 21st Century: How to Address Violence in Ways that Generate Empowerment for both Men and Women. Sydney: Caritas Australia.
- FAUGÈRE, E. 2013. *Les économies de l'échange en Nouvelle-Calédonie. Mariage et deuils à Maré*. Paris, France: Éditions Karthala.
- FILER, C. 1985. What Is This Thing Called 'Brideprice'?, *Mankind* 15(2):163-183.
- FRIEDMAN, J. 2002. Modernity and Other Traditions. In B.M. Knauft (ed.), *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologie*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 287-307.
- GOOBERMAN-HILL, R. 1999. The Constraints of 'Feeling Free': Becoming Middle Class in Honiara (Solomon Islands). Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Edinburgh.
- GREGORY, C. A. 1982. *Gifts and Commodities*. London: Academic Press.
- GUO, P.Y. 2006. From Currency to Agency: Shell-Money in Contemporary Langa Langa, Solomon Islands. *Asia-Pacific Forum* 31: 17-38.
- HANNERZ, U., 1987, The World in Creolization, *Africa*, 57: 546-559.
- HESS, S., 2009, *Person and Place: Ideas, Ideals and the Practice of Sociality on Vanua Lava, Vanuatu*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- HOGBIN, H. I. 1939. *Experiments in Civilization: The Effects of European Culture on a Native Community of the Solomon Islands*. London: G. Routledge & Sons, Ltd.
- HORNE, C., F. N.-A DODOO and N. DODUA DODOO. The Shadow of Indebtedness: Bridewealth and Norms Constraining Women's Reproductive Autonomy. *American Sociological Review* 78(3): 503-520.
- HUKULA, F. 2017. Kinship and Relatedness in Urban Papua New Guinea, *Le Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 144-145: 159-70.
- IVENS, W. G. 1972 [c1927]. *Melanesians of the South-East Solomon Islands*. New York: B. Blom.
- . 1980 [c1927]. *The Islands Builders of the Pacific*. London: Seeley, Services & Co. Limited.
- JOLLY, M. and M. MACINTYRE (eds.). 2010. *Family and Gender in the Pacific: Domestic Contradictions and Colonial Impact*. Oakland, CA: California University Press.
- JOLLY, M. 2015. Braed Praes in Vanuatu: Both Gifts and Commodities? *Oceania* 85(1): 63-78.
- JOURDAN, C. 1987. Être mélanésienne et vivre en ville. Communication présentée dans le cadre du séminaire 'Contraintes et maîtrise du développement: la réponse des femmes et des hommes'. Paris-Orstom, 5 mars 1987.
- . 1996. Where Have All the Cultures Gone? Sociocultural Creolization in Solomon Islands. In J. Friedman and J. Carrier (eds.), *Melanesian Modernities*. Lund: Lund University Press, pp. 34-52.
- . 1998. Bridewealth Revisited: Marriage and Urbanization in the Solomon Islands. Seminar Paper presented at the School of Pacific and Asian Studies, ANU, Canberra. 29 April 1998.



- 
- . 2000. My Nephew is my Aunt: Features and Transformations of Kinship Terminology in Solomon Islands Pijin'. In J. Siegel (ed.), *Processes of Language Contact: Studies from Australia and the South Pacific*. Montreal: Fides, pp. 99-122.
- . 2007. Linguistic Paths to Urban Self in Post-Colonial Solomon Islands, In M. Makihara and B. B. Schieffelin (eds.), *Consequences of Contact: Language Ideologies and Sociocultural Transformations in Pacific Societies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.30-48.
- . 2017. Hoasgel: Kinship, Class and Urban Transformations. *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 144-145:131-146.
- JOURDAN, C. and A. BLACK. 2017. 'I am not an animal to be paid for': Bridewealth, Identity and Urbanization in Solomon Islands. Paper presented at the Canadian Anthropology Society Conference, Ottawa, Canada, May 2-7 2017.
- KÖNGÄS MARANDA, E. 1974. Lau, Malaita: 'A Woman Is an Alien Spirit.' In C.J. Matthiasson (ed.), *Many Sisters. Women in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New York: Free Press, pp.177-202.
- LINDSTROM, L. and C. JOURDAN. 2017. L'urbanisation en Mélanésie. *Le Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 144-145: 5-22.
- LIPSET, D. 2017. Mobile Telephones as Public Sphere in Peri-Urban Papua New Guinea. *Le Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 144-145: 195-208.
- MACINTYRE, M. 2011. 'Money Changes Everything': Papua New Guinean Women in the Modern Economy. In M. Patterson and M. Macintyre (eds.), *Managing Modernity in the Western Pacific*. St-Lucia: University of Queensland Press, pp. 90-120.
- MAGGIO, R. 2014. 'Honiara Is Hard': *The Domestic Moral Economy of the Kware'ae People of the Gilbert Camp, Solomon Islands*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Manchester.
- . 2017. Relative Customers: Demand-sharing, Kinship and Selling in Solomon Islands. In D. C. Wood (ed.), *Anthropological Considerations of Production, Exchange, Vending and Tourism*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing, pp. 155-175.
- MALBRANCKE, A. S. 2016. Une épouse pour de l'argent? Des pratiques matrimoniales en mutation et leurs répercussions socio-culturelles chez les Baruya de Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée. Unpublished PhD Thesis, École des hautes études en sciences sociales.
- MARKSBURY, R. A. 1993. Marriage in Transition in Oceania. In R. Marksbury (ed.), *The Business of Marriage: Transformations in Oceanic Matrimony*. Pittsburg : University of Pittsburg Press, pp. 3-26.
- MOORE, C. 2015. Honiara: Arrival City and Pacific Living Space. *Journal of Pacific History* 15(4):419-36.
- NICOLAS, H. 2012. *La fabrique des époux. Approche anthropologique et historique du mariage, de la conjugalité et du genre (Lifou, Nouvelle-Calédonie)*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Aix-Marseille Université.
- PANOFF, M. 1978. Mariage, divorce et régime de filiation en Nouvelle-Bretagne. *Revue française de sociologie* 19(4): 479-496.
- PICKLES, A. J. 2017. To Excel at Bridewealth, or Ceremonies of Office. *Anthropology Today* 33(1): 19-22.

- 
- POLLARD, A. A. 2000. *Givers of Wisdom, Labourers without Gain: Essays on Women in Solomon Islands*. Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.
- RIO, K. 2017. Demand-Sharing and Fences: Aspects of the New Port Vila Household. *Le Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 144-145: 91-104.
- ROSI, P. and L. ZIMMER-TAMAKOSHI. 1993. Love and Marriage Among the Educated Elite in Port Moresby. In R. Marksbury (ed.) *The Business of Marriage: Transformations in Oceanic Matrimony*. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, pp. 175-204.
- SALOMON, C. 2000. Hommes et femmes. Harmonie d'ensemble ou antagoniste sourd? In A. Bensa and I. Leblic (eds.), *En pays kanak. Ethnologie, linguistique, archéologie, histoire de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*. Paris : Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'Homme, pp. 311-38.
- SCOTT, M. W. 2007. *The Severed Snake: Matrilineages, Making Place, and a Melanesian Christianity in Southeast Solomon Islands*. Durham, N.C: Carolina Academic Press.
- SECRETARIAT OF THE PACIFIC COMMUNITY. 2009. *Solomon Islands Family Health and Safety Study: A Study on Violence Against Women and Children*. Noumea: Secretariat of the Pacific Community.
- SERVY, A. 2013. 'As-tu un petit copain? Non je n'ai pas de téléphone'. *Moralité, progrès technique et sexualité en milieu urbain au Vanuatu. Hermès* 65: 137-43.
- . 2017. 'AIDS Is Here': Prévenir les infections sexuellement transmissibles à Port Vila, Vanuatu.' Unpublished PhD Thesis. École des hautes études en sciences sociales.
- SOLOMON ISLANDS NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE, 2012, *Solomon Islands National Population and Housing Census 2009*. Honiara, Statistical Bulletin no. 6/2012.
- SOLOMON ISLANDS NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE, 2013, *Solomon Islands National Population and Housing Census 2009. Report on Migration and Urbanisation*. Honiara. Accessed online: [http://www.mof.gov.sb/Libraries/Statistics/2013\\_12\\_-\\_2009\\_Census\\_Report\\_on\\_Migration\\_and\\_Urbanisation.sflb.ashx](http://www.mof.gov.sb/Libraries/Statistics/2013_12_-_2009_Census_Report_on_Migration_and_Urbanisation.sflb.ashx)
- SOLOMON ISLANDS NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE, 2015, Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2012-2013. Honiara. Accessed online: <https://www.statistics.gov.sb/statistics/demographic-statistics/household-income-and-expenditure-surveys>
- SPARK, C. 2011. Gender Trouble in Town: Educated Women Eluding Male Domination, Gender Violence and Marriage in PNG. *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 12(2):164-179.
- STRATHERN, M. 1972. *Women in Between: Female Roles in a Male World: Mount Hagen, New Guinea*. London and New York: Seminar Press.
- STRITECKY, J. M. 2001. *Looking Through a Moral Lens: Morality, Violence and Empathy in Solomon Island*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Iowa.
- SYKES, K. 2013. Mortgaging the Bridewealth: Problems with Brothers and Problems with Value. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3(2): 97-117.

- 
- TAYLOR, J.P. 2016. Drinking Money and Pulling Women: Mobile Phone Talk, Gender, and Agency in Vanuatu. *Anthropological Forum* 26(1): 1-16.
- WARDLOW, H. 2006. *Wayward Women: Sexuality and Agency in a New Guinea Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- WHITEMAN, D. 1983. *Melanesians and Missionaries: an Ethnohistorical Study of Social and Religious change in the South West Pacific*.
- ZIMMER-TAMAKOSHI, L. 1998. Women in Town. In L. Zimmer-Tamakoshi (ed.), *Modern Papua New Guinea*. Kirksville, Missouri: Thomas Jefferson University Press, pp. 195-210.
- ZORN, J.G. 2010. Custom Then and Now: The Changing Melanesian Family. In A. Jowitt and T.N. Cain (eds.), *Passage of Change: Law, Society and Governance in the Pacific*. Canberra: Australian National University Press, pp. 95-124.