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WORKSHOP 85: Mourning, intimacy and the special character of the conjugal relationship

Being Married to a Spirit: Mourning Rituals for a Wedding in South Bioko (Equatorial Guinea)

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Based on my ethnographic data, this paper examines the rituals that Bubi women undertake when they marry a spirit. In this type of “traditional” marriage, a woman takes on a two-fold status: she becomes at once a legally married person and a widow.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO BUBI SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The Bubi are the autochthonous ethnic group of the Island of Bioko in Equatorial Guinea. In numbers of population, the Bubi are the second ethnic group in the country, although they represent only 9% opposed to the 82% that the Fang ethnic majority represents.

Bubi social organization is articulated in two descent groups: the matriline, "carichobo," and the patriline, "loká" with descendants inheriting both clans.² Both patriline and matriline have a chief called the “mochuku,” who is the oldest person. Likewise, the oldest woman of the matriline, the “mochukuari” shares the chieftaincy of the matriline with the man. The “mochuku” appellation also refers to any man whose hierarchical status makes him relevant, and as we will see, to refer, as well, to the spirit-husbands because they belonged to this status when they were alive. Bubi clans are exogamous and segmented in lineages without names. All the patriline in turn are divided in subpatriline with different social ranking, which demonstrates the existence of a very structured internal social hierarchic organization in the past.³

Succession to the chieftaincy is patrilineal and follows birth order starting with the firstborn among the men; inheritance, however, was traditionally matrilineal. At present, inheritance is bilateral, as properties from both parents go to all their descendants, sons and daughters. Post-marital residence was patrilocal but nowadays there is no rule and, basically, this depends on the economic possibilities. The extended family is the most common type, but the matrifocal type of family is also quite frequent,

² Each matriline and patriline has three types of spirits; one of them, the main spirit, is venerated as the protecting spirit or founder. The most important spiritual element of the patriline, together with the three spirits, is the "bojulá": a force or energy with a sacred origin that reaches all the members of the patriline and is channeled through the paternal line, while blood ties are transmitted along the maternal line. The patriline's main function is precisely as a path of transmission, from one generation to the next, of the aforementioned spiritual powers.

³ The meaning of the names in the patriline shows their functional character in the past and their importance in the social structure. In general, these names refer to jobs (fishermen, hunters) or are associated with ritual functions (inaugurating or concluding ceremonies, blessing the inauguration of a house, curing evil, crowning chiefs). In other cases, they explicitly allude to the social and hierarchical organization (landowners, servants of the chiefs, or members of the monarchy).

grouping together in the same residential unit three generations: the mother, the unmarried sons and daughters, and one or more daughters with their offspring.

MARRIAGE

The Bubi distinguish between two types of marriage: 1) common-law marriage and 2) "traditional" marriage. I will speak of both types referring both to the past (which I will call "old-time" marriages) and to the present (present-day marriages). Regarding "common-law" marriages I will give only brief information as this is not relevant for the purpose of this paper; then I will focus on the old-time and present-day "traditional marriage" practices. I will present a brief ethnographic description of the most important aspects of both practices, which are clearly related.

OLD-TIME MARRIAGES

1.A. "Rivala re rijole" (old "common-law" marriage)

"Rivala" in the Bubi language means wedding and "rijole" love. This type of marriage was a socially approved free union without legal acknowledgement. It was practiced by a large part of the population that did not have the status or sufficient means to make a legal marriage and also by widowed women and, exceptionally, divorced or repudiated women.

2.A. "Rivala re eoto" (old "traditional" marriage)

"Eoto" means "virginity." In these marriages, "bride wealth" or "voolo" (which literally means "to give the value of the bride"⁴) was established. It was restricted to the high echelons of the hierarchy, as was the polygyny that existed in former times. The marriage was decided before the birth of the child,⁵ when the child was a newborn, or when the girl reached puberty. Before the wedding, the young woman needed to go through a period of initiation and instruction, shut away in her mother's house.⁶ The

⁴ The main object that intervened in this transaction was the "lokó," small shell beads threaded on strings that were used as money and as adornments, a symbol of wealth.

⁵ If the child was male, he would acquire a series of obligations to carry out farming and hunting tasks, etc.)

⁶ The period varied according to the age of the girl until her first menstruation. She was taught all the duties and obligations that she would have in her new stage as a wife: to cook, to obey her husband, not to refuse to have sexual relations with her husband, and not to be unfaithful (adultery was severely punished). This period is called "Bula": seeing the moon or sitting down (association with menstruation and being shut away). Sometimes the term "bula" was used by extension to denominate this kind of marriage also, because the event of the first menstruation and, consequently, the possibility of conceiving, are intimately linked to the young woman's availability for marriage.

marriage was consecrated to the spirit of fertility "Uri." This marriage made the woman's children legitimate and, thus, the succession to the political and religious positions.

Similarly, the woman acquired the right to inherit her husband's goods.

Divorce was possible but it was a definite exception. In order to divorce, the woman had to go to the forest where she had consecrated her marriage before the spirit "Uri," leave the "meuta" (the belt that she wore the day of her wedding as a symbol of the alliance) and return home without being seen. After that, the young woman had to leave her village to carry out the l "yibi": "leave the bad luck behind": she needed to have sexual relations with an unfamiliar man whom she would not see again. When she returned to the village, her divorce could be announced publicly and she was free to marry any other man, but only by the "rivala re rijole" marriage.

Mourning for the deceased husband

In Bubi, mourning receives different names,⁷ with "Mododo" being the most common. The widow had to shave her head as a sign of misfortune and remain shut away in the house of the deceased.⁸ After twenty days had passed, she went to bathe at the beach or in the river to purify herself of the "contamination" that being in mourning involves and she had to throw away into the water the hair that she had cut off and kept. Then she shut herself away again for another twenty days, dressed in the distinctive clothing of a widow. From that moment on, she went out to visit relatives and neighbors in order to receive condolence gifts. Mourning ended a long time later, coinciding with a of the agricultural cycle ceremony, in which the widow offered the yams that had been planted to her dead husband. Only when mourning had ended was the woman free, although, like a divorced woman, the only possible union that she could make was a "rijole" (love) marriage.

PRESENT-DAY MARRIAGES

1.B. "estilo del país" (present-day "common-law" marriage)

⁷ "mokodo momodo kúo" (hair off for the deceased husband) "toa esuví" , ó "mochue évé" (ugly head)

⁸ During this period she had to be with the same clothes. The widow. The distinctive clothes of a widow were the brazalets she wore round de knees and arms, a belt and to be body painted with a yellow chalk. The mourning last depending on when she had started because always ended with the agricultural cycle ceremonies.

The “estilo de país” (literally, “country style”) marriage is the most frequent marriage, not only among the Bubi, but in the whole country. It is important to point out that this marriage differs from the old-time “common-law” marriage: “rijole”, in that it is legally acknowledged on a social and national level. So, the spouse married according to the “estilo de país,” (as long as the woman is not married “traditionally”) is also the legal father, in addition to being the biological and social father.

2.B) “Mododo” (Present-day "traditional" marriage)

The political and religious chieftaincies resided in the south of Bioko Island and so there was more hierarchy and traditional “rivala re eoto” marriage was more generalized. Because of this, at present the two forms of marriage still coexist: people marry according to the “estilo de país” and women also marry according to the “mododo” way. In this alliance, a spirit is attributed to a woman as a husband and as the legal pater of any children she may have, generally, with her “estilo del país” marriage partner, who will only be the biological and social father. The spirit husband is called “mochuku” (chief). So according to Bubi law, “mododo” marriage is the legal one because it is the spirit husband who provides legitimacy to descendants who will be members of the spirit patriclan.⁹ It is not a by chance that this marriage is called “Mododo,” the same term as for mourning; since the husband is deceased, the young woman must carry out the rituals for the death of her husband. The mourning ceremonies thus acquire the nature of an alliance.

The marriage is usually celebrated when the young girl reaches puberty. At this age, young girls often leave the village to continue studying, so the ritual also acquires connotations of a protection ritual. But on other occasions it is postponed until the woman has children. The wedding begins with the choice of the spirit husband for the young woman (“elovayo”) and the clans of the young woman are the ones who take the initiative of establishing the marriage, what means, to find her a deceased husband by consulting an oracle. The spirit that the oracle reveals can be an ancestor who has not yet been chosen as a husband or a spirit of some relevant person.¹⁰ The wedding ceremonies

⁹ Each individual acquires multiple ritual obligations throughout life with his or her legal pater: from birth and, yearly, throughout the entire ritual cycle of yam cultivation, he or she must worship him with offerings during the different harvest periods. In the case of women, they must make offerings to their spirit husbands.

¹⁰ The following people go to the oracle: the matrilineage, an older person from the mother’s matriclan and another from the legal father’s matriclan. When the young woman, in turn, has female children, her

that follow, once the spouse is determined, are the same ones that are carried out in mourning and that I have already mentioned: the woman is shut away in the house of the relatives of her spirit husband (nowadays, is only for a week), her hair is cut, and she must go through the village (this is now done previously to the purification bath).

Respect to the old-time mourning describe, this mourning-wedding incorporates a new ritual that represents the consummation of the marriage. The last day of the period of seclusion, the young woman goes to the forest at night, accompanied by the eldest woman of the family. Once there, she lays down naked on the ground until she hears the first noise produced in the forest, after which she dresses immediately and returns to the village. This is the announcement that the spirit (her husband) has arrived. On some occasions, after this episode, there is also a simplified “yibi” ritual for divorcing. The woman spends the night outside of the village, but she does not have to have sexual relations with anyone.¹¹

From that moment on, the young woman will go on with her daily life, although she will remain in mourning until the last mourning ceremony that has been mentioned takes place: the offering of yams to the husband and the purification bath in the river when she throws away her cut-off hair.

Analyzing the ceremonies for the present-day “traditional” wedding, we can observe that they contain elements drawn from: a) the marriage ritual, b) the divorce practices that existed formally, and c) the mourning practices for a deceased husband. As a result of this syncretism, the ritual reveals a series of interesting transitions in the woman’s status:

During a **first phase** of the ritual, in which the woman acquires her spirit-husband, she goes from being single to being married. During a **second phase**, she goes from being

matriclan, together with the matriclan of her spirit husband, will be the ones who intervene in the election of the daughters’ future spirit husbands. The origin of the spirit that is chosen to be the husband depends on the distribution of the female children who are distributed among the two aforementioned clans. The assignment is made in the following order: the first-born daughter goes to her legal father (the “spirit father”) and the “spirit husband” that will be assigned to her in the future will belong to this matriclan. The second daughter goes to her mother and her future “spirit husband” will belong to her matriclan, and so on.

¹¹ Among Young people, this ritual nowadays it is no more a tabu as in the past, but a moment of jokes as boys use to say that they are really expecting to be the one with whom she "leave the bad luck behind"

married to being a widow, but even the wedding takes on the appearance of mourning ceremony, the episode of the young woman in the forest reinforces the meaning of alliance that this ritual has. In the **third phase**, she goes from being widow to being free, going through a moment, in some cases, of being divorced. So the young woman must go through a triple process of symbolic transition: Married -widow (divorced) - free

Neither the status of a widow nor of a divorced woman are equivalent to the status of being single, because she cannot marry again according to traditional law, but she is free. As a result, the woman, all the while remaining legally married to her spirit-husband, is free to form new relationships or to continue her conjugal life with her children's genitor with whom she can contract a common-law marriage. This genitor is called the "thief" because, according to Bubi discourse, "the man does the job for the spirit husband so he allows this "theft" of his legal wife".

WHAT DOES THIS ACQUIRED STATUS IMPLY?

To answer this question, we must analyze the transformations that marriage has undergone, that is, we must look for the differences between present and past practice and what their implications are:

- The legal husband was the one to choose the wife. Nowadays, it is the family of the young woman that carries the roll to ask the Oracle who will be her spirit husband
- There is no polygyny nor "bride wealth" (woman's virginity is no longer relevant).
- The difference in the age at which the alliance is celebrated is that today, it can also be celebrated even when the woman has already had children; in this case, the intention is specifically to know who the legal father is.
- Divorce was exceptional, but now it is symbolically incorporated in the alliance ritual.
- The legal husband was alive, but due to the age of the girl, as mentioned before, he was always an elderly person and he could die before the girl reached puberty. In that case, the young girl had to go through mourning and that is the origin of the present ceremony. Currently the legal husband is a spirit.
- To become a free woman, the wife had to get divorced or wait until her husband's death. Nowadays, during the wedding ceremony the bride goes through mourning and afterwards gets a divorce in a symbolic way.

- The distinction between legal paternity (spirit-husband) and biological paternity (conjugal partner) in the past was only significant when the woman married by legal union and her husband died very soon. Today, this obviously happens in every marriage of this type. This has important implications for group membership and for the regulation of kinship relations. For instance, ritual links still intervene, as in the past, in the succession to religious authority or chieftaincy.¹²
- This distinction of paternity roles also demonstrates the social inclusion of the spirits and the continuity between dead and living individuals: ancestors and living people are involved in the same kinship system as a whole.
- Relegating previously enforced prescriptions related to legal marriage and mourning to a symbolic plane, has contributed to improving the status and empowering present-day Bubi women who have married traditionally because :
 - 1°- Instead of being subservient to the husband (due to the prescriptions) the spirit-husband gives protection (if he is well venerated and fed).
 - 2°- The women are not obliged to live and work with the husband´s group.
 - 3° -The women have more freedom for different sexual relations and for setting up conjugal links with whomever they decide.

In fact, it is common among men and women to have more than one partner throughout their lives and that is also because it is not so difficult to sever links in common-law marriage “estilo del país. These attitudes all favor a sequential monogamy model. The marriage practices have an obvious relation with family composition and with the matrifocal units (mentioned in the introduction) that are frequently established.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS:

- First, I must mention that there is a combination of two types of marriage that are made in parallel. Both types of marriage are legal although they have a different degree of recognition: one is common-law marriage “estilo de país”, practiced by the great majority of the people. It is legally acknowledged on a

¹² In order for an individual to be able to accede to this authority, it is his legal pater (his mother´s spirit-husband), not his biological father, who must belong to a hierarchical clan. The difference compared to the past is that religious authority has now disappeared and local chieftaincy authority has lost its relevance (first during the colonization and later with the modern State).

social and national level and has no prescriptions that denigrates the woman's status. The other type of marriage is the "traditional" "mododo" type, practiced only by a small group of Bubi people. It is considered legal in the local Bubi ethnic sphere and the older strict prescriptions are now symbolically ritualized.

- Therefore, the possibility of making both types of marriage at the same time gives any Bubi woman, no matter what type of marriage alliance she has made, the opportunity to:
 - a) Benefit from more freedom (before, this was only possible in "rijole" – based on love – marriage, even though it was not legally acknowledged).
 - b) Benefit from complete social and legal admission (before, only those who married "traditionally" had this opportunity).
- This present status of Bubi women with autonomy and effective real control gives them freedom. This statement agrees with the aforementioned tendencies in kinship links and relations, not only in marriage but also in the family group, as well as the tendencies in residence, the transmission of inheritances, etc. All of these characteristics contrast with the surrounding patrilineal societies that are characterized, among other things, by a kind of patrilocal residence and with no possibility of divorce due to the need to return the "bride wealth". In these cases, the women feel more distant from their family groups and any help they might receive from them. The woman has less authority and her husband has greater authority.

On the contrary, because of their kinship system, Bubi women tend to remain together with close family ties, home residence and cooperation in all housework such as raising and educating the children. All these chores are generally assumed by the female kin on the mother's side.
- Finally, we must mention the importance of the symbolic dimension. Although the ritual that I have been describing is only practiced by a minority of Bubi society, I must point out that is not the idea of its representativeness that is relevant, but rather what this ritual allows us to explain. Taking all this into account, I have tried, on one hand, to show the influence that symbolic practices have in making changes in society. On the other hand, it is a good example for illustrating the dynamics of "tradition" (which may seem static on the

intellectual level) but is, nevertheless, a process of continuous transformation and adaptation.