

READING ACROSS CULTURES: TWO STORIES FROM PAPUA NEW GUINEA ON ARRANGED MARRIAGES

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The issue of arranged marriages in a developing country may be a hazardous topic for a European to discuss. In her 1982 essay entitled “White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood”, Hazel V. Carby warns that Euro-American feminism often fails to comprehend the concerns of black women, due to its “Eurocentric (and often racist) framework” (1982: 226). In particular, Carby takes arranged marriages as an example of those family structures which the Western World considers “pathologic”, as opposed to the “Western nuclear family structure and related ideologies of ‘romantic love’” (215-216). The white nuclear family, Carby claims, is the measure by which other family structures are judged and often condemned by Western observers, who on the other hand ignore the actual struggles of women in developing countries (216-217).

As a European woman lecturing in literature in Papua New Guinea, and interested in women’s issues, I initially found myself in the position of those Western observers that Carby criticized: faced with the existence in our own university community and in PNG at large of marriage customs I was not familiar with, customs that I considered a violation of women’s human rights, I would mainly note their negative consequences as reported in the local papers: low self-esteem on the part of women, abandonment, divorce and domestic violence. I also expected literary works, especially if written by women, to express their concerns with the customs and their desire to eliminate them. In my time in PNG, however,

I had the opportunity to read several literary texts by PNG writers centered on the issue of arranged marriages that challenged my understanding of it. In particular, among the stories and plays on the theme, I searched for those written by women –not an easy search, due to what critic Lolo Houbein in 1982 defined as the “virtual absence of women writers” in the country (1982: 3).¹ I was especially intrigued, however, by two very different stories by Sally-Ann Bagita, a writer from the Central province, who published a considerable number of stories and poems in the 1970s and 80s, first in *Papua New Guinea Writing* and later in *The Times of Papua New Guinea*, a magazine of which she also became editor.² These two stories, which I will discuss in this article, on the one hand seem to critique the tradition of arranged marriage, as I would have expected. On the other hand, however, they also appear to reveal that the problems are not so much in the custom itself, as in the modern, Westernized understanding of it.

Marriage in Melanesia: the socio-anthropological background

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In Melanesian societies, missionary and anthropologist Ennio Mantovani claims, marriage is not considered so much a union of two individuals, as of two communities: “Traditional marriage is communitarian; two communities are bound together through the couple” (1993: 14). Therefore, marriage, he continues, “is basically a service to the community, establishing relationship and providing continuity. It is not primarily concerned with the couple but with the society that carries the couple” (14). In other words, when the community takes precedence over the individual, the actual choice of partners themselves becomes less important. The reason for the difference between the Western and Melanesian understanding of marriage, Mantovani explains elsewhere, is that until very recently in Melanesian societies biological survival “was found only in the community” (1982: 5), and therefore individuals were willing to give up personal freedom for the sake of the survival and happiness of the society (7).

This communitarian understanding of marriage thus explains the widely accepted practise of arranged marriages, in which two families, or two clans, decide that two people should marry. One example of this practice comes from the life experience of Australian-born Lady Carol Kidu, the only female member of Parliament in PNG and arguably the best-known public female figure in the country. In her autobiography *A Remarkable Journey* she recounts how, in the early stages of their courtship in 1965, her PNG boyfriend learned that his family had arranged a wife for him. Kidu explains that in Motu societies, “marriage was a family matter bringing together two extended families and very often betrothals were arranged

without the involvement or consent of the people involved” (2002: 28). In this particular case, both parties concerned were already involved with somebody else, but that fact “was not really relevant to the families” (28).

In more recent times the custom of arranged marriages may not be practised as widely as in the past, especially in urban areas, since people who live in the city, who have an income and a house provided by their workplace, may consider themselves independent from their kin group for their survival (Schwarz 1983: 4).³ However, the tradition is still widespread enough to cause concern in the church and in women’s groups. In a pastoral letter of 1993, the Catholic Bishops of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands called on the grandparents and the village elders to use “wisdom and integrity” in their decisions about the marriage of young people, making sure that marriage agreements take into consideration “both the good of the young couple and the community”, as well as “mature love and the consent of the couple involved” (1993: 14). And a 2002 reportage in the magazine *New@gewoman* quotes recent ‘case studies’ that confirm the continuation of the practice of arranged marriages, especially in village settings, with or without the consent of the two people who are to marry (Vere 2002).

Two stories by Sally-Ann Bagita

The two stories that I consider in this article, set in the early 1970s, point particularly to the problems arising when parents try to impose the custom of arranged marriages on the younger generation –the first to be educated– who are unwilling to follow them. The protagonists of Sally-Ann Bagita’s “Regret Not” (1973) and “The Reluctant Bride” (1974) are young men and women who had no choice but to accept a marriage arranged by their families. The stories, however, focus particularly on the female characters and show how they react to the same initial situation in very different ways.

Kiri, the protagonist of the short story “Regret Not”, is a sixteen-year-old girl who has to leave her village in the Marshall Lagoon to marry an unknown young man, Morea, who lives in Hanuabada, an urbanized centre in the vicinity of Port Moresby. “Like most village girls” the narrating voice comments, “she did not question the arrangement of the marriage or the suitability of the husband; she accepted as it was the custom” (1996: 154). Nor did her village sweetheart. He just watched Kiri board the ship that would take her to Port Moresby and sang her a consolatory song: “Regret not that you are leaving behind your childhood dreams...” (154).

Upon arriving at her destination and seeing both the “well built young man” (154) who is to become her husband, and the large house provided with electricity and

running water where she will be living, Kiri feels lucky, and decides to make the most of the situation. The marriage arrangements between Kiri and Morea are an example of customary marriage, without any proper ceremony to mark them. In fact, they are conducted more like a business transaction than a romantic proposal. On their first stroll together, Morea proposes a “bargain”: “Look after my parents, and I promise you I’ll look after you and make you happy” (155). Kiri consents and settles down happily in her new life as a married woman, assisting her in-laws, going to the market, and discovering such thrills of city life as football and the cinema with her husband. In due time Kiri gives birth to a baby boy, thus strengthening her role in the family, and marking her right to be considered truly married to Morea.

In the meantime Lairi, an ex-girlfriend of Morea’s, now a widow, returns to work in the same office as Morea, and their relationship is renewed. After a row with Kiri, who has become suspicious of all his ‘overtime’, Morea leaves the house. He does not return for weeks. One night a relative confirms that Morea is, indeed, living with Lairi. After shedding “tears of pity for herself and her son” (158), Kiri decides that she must go on with her life. The following day, as she and her child set sail from Port Moresby, she hears a familiar song from a radio: “Regret not”, the song reminds her.

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In contrast to Kiri, Ikena, the female protagonist of Bagita’s “The Reluctant Bride”, takes a much more belligerent attitude to the marriage that her family has arranged for her with Boga. Her refusal to consent to the union, however, has gained her nothing but a solid beating from her brothers, who first “belted her” and then “drag[ged] her by the hair” (1994: 12). On her wedding day, when the story begins, Ikena is so obviously unhappy that the planned dance is cancelled, and Boga decides to play the gentleman, letting Ikena have the room to herself while he sleeps on the verandah. Rumors of the arrangement reach Ikena’s family who with an excuse call her home, where her brothers beat her again.

Having been expelled by her family, Ikena wanders about until she finds a cave. There she spends a few days, regaining mental and physical strength, until Boga finds her. But instead of dragging her home by the hair, or sending her back to her parents where she would surely be beaten again, he offers to take her to the YWCA, where she will be safe and can start a new life. As for himself, Boga plans to move to Bougainville, never to return to his family, or allow them to force him “into another unhappy marriage” (16). At that point, however, Ikena emerges from her cave and puts a hand into his. “I don’t want to go to the Y” (16), she announces, as the narrative comes to an end.

These two stories, although based on the same initial issue –a marriage arranged by parents without their children’s consent– and both featuring strong female

characters as their protagonist, also have a number of points of contrast: Kiri initially doesn't want to marry Morea because she is in love with somebody else, while Ikena simply doesn't like Boga but has no previous attachment. Kiri decides to make the best of her situation, however, and at first establishes a good relationship with her husband, whom she has never seen before. Ikena, on the other hand, refuses to have any contact with Boga before her wedding day and, although she helps his mother with chores, she never talks to him. Readers may wonder if physical appeal has anything to do with the two women's different attitudes. After all, Kiri finds herself tied to a "well built young man". While Boga, although never physically described in the story, obviously does not appear attractive to Ikena who defines him as a "clumsy, unattractive pig" and a "wild boar" (11). The importance of physical appearance in "The Reluctant Bride" is underlined by the protagonists' names as well: in Motu, the language spoken in several areas of the Central province, Ikena means "fit", while Boga means "belly".⁴

The protagonists' social class and upbringing may have something to do with their attitudes as well: Kiri is a simple village girl, easily dazzled by and content with the wonders of electricity, running water and city activities. Ikena appears to come from an upper middle-class family, who has planned for a Western-style church wedding, complete with choir and photographer, followed by a reception and a dance. Although no information on her education is given, readers might assume enough Western influence on Ikena for her to dream of marrying for love.⁵ At any rate, she hates the idea of being sold "like a prize pig" (12), while Kiri never expresses resentment about the financial arrangements that accompany her marriage.

Nevertheless, although it may contribute to her being an obedient, docile, hardworking, faithful wife, Kiri's village upbringing may also be the cause of her problems. It does not seem casual that her husband Morea should fall for a more sophisticated woman, one who has obviously had enough education to work in the same office as he, one who had previously married a foreigner and lived in Lae, PNG's second city. Moreover, she was an old flame of his, which again seems to imply that he would prefer a city to a village girl. Although the story does not say so, it must have been Morea's parents, now city-dwellers, who sought him out a village girl for a wife. Thus, the failure of the marriage must, in part anyway, be laid at the feet of the parents, since they did not see –nor want to see– that their educated son would not be satisfied with a village girl.

The families in the stories get involved in a different way as well: Kiri's parents seem oblivious to her initial suffering, but care enough to stay with her and her new family for as long as it takes to make sure that she can cope with the new situation, until they are sure that she has "settl[ed] down happily in her new role" (1996: 155). Morea's parents are satisfied with her performance as a wife, and put together a

considerable bride price for her, after she produces a son. Although they do not take an active role in trying to patch up the marriage, when Morea's relationship with Lairi is rekindled, they are obviously distressed at the idea of Kiri leaving with the child.

Ikena's family seems to be reduced to a sympathetic but powerless mother, and a few evil brothers, who, whenever she rebels, resort to beating a bit of sense and obedience into her head. In fact, when her hideout is discovered, Ikena fears that they have come "to murder her" (1994: 15). In other words, Ikena's family does not appear so much concerned about her happiness or marital arrangements, as about gossip and the possibility of losing (or having to return) the bride price.

Apart from his sister's helping Ikena get ready on her wedding day, Boga's family does not receive a mention until the end of the story. It is only at the end, in fact, while Boga is waiting outside the cave for Ikena to change into the clean clothes he has brought for her, that the focus of the story switches away from her and onto him. The readers enter his thoughts and discover that he too was forced into the marriage, and the only way out would be for him to move as far away from his family as possible –to Bougainville, the northern part of the Solomon Islands that now belongs to PNG. At any rate he makes it clear that "he would never return to Hanuabada" (16). Thus Bagita's story stresses the fact that women are not the only victims in arranged marriages, but that this custom may bring unhappiness to both partners. Even in "Regret Not", moreover, although the story and the audience's sympathy were focused on the female protagonist, readers are not allowed to forget that Morea too was forced into a marriage that he did not want, as discussed above.

Although both appear to ask whether happiness is possible in an arranged marriage, the endings of the stories give a different message. Kiri does all that is in her power to make a good life for herself and her husband: she accepts him promptly, works, stays in a good mood, respects and helps his parents, and bears a son. In sum, the story depicts her as a faultless wife, who has kept her part of the initial bargain. Nonetheless, her husband abandons her.

Ikena, on the contrary, does nothing to help the situation: she refuses to get to know her betrothed, avoids intimacy with him after the marriage, and finally runs away from him. All this because she did not have romantic feelings for him.⁶ However, as she eventually discovers, it is not physical appearance that counts in a marriage. Boga reveals himself to be gentle, sensitive, caring. He is interested as much in her happiness as in his own. And so, she figures at the end, he may be worth giving a try after all.

In sum, Kiri does everything she can to make her arranged marriage work, yet it doesn't. Ikena does everything she can to stop her arranged marriage, and make it fail once it does happen; yet in the end it seems she may have been fortunate enough to find a suitable match, after all. Lolo Houbein, in her article on the

theme of love in PNG literature, concludes that the author “merely wanted to portray how different individuals reacted and coped with a situation which is dictated to them by custom” (1982: 23).

Houbein’s analysis of Bagita’s stories, however, does not take into consideration one important episode in “The Reluctant Bride”, which would offer an alternative form of life for the female protagonist, and whose significance is underlined by the illustrations in both published versions of the story. As I have already mentioned, after being beaten again by her brothers, Ikena runs away and finds shelter in a cave. But it wasn’t just any cave: it was known only to Ikena and her grandmother who used to make her gardens in the vicinity. There, using a net that used to belong to her grandmother, Ikena lives from the fish in the river as well as some forgotten vegetables. Thus the cave offers a secure shelter, and in this safe, secluded space, as she loses track of the passing time, “Ikena’s body beg[ins] to heal” (14). The author has marked the cave as a sacred woman’s space both from a physical and spiritual point of view. It is a secret female space “covered over with vines and shrubs” (14). Moreover, it comes to Ikena through knowledge inherited from her grandmother, in a sort of female genealogy that may save her, and offer her a role model: a strong grandmother, as opposed to a sympathetic, but still passive, mother. In other words, the cave is depicted as a sort of utopian space, in which time does not exist, and where a woman can be on her own. She has shelter, she has food, she is safe, her body heals, she is content and independent.

In this timeless, safe, healing cave, Ikena has a chance to reflect on the events, and to wonder whether she should finally accept the fact that she is married to Boga. “But it all seemed so difficult and impossible”, the narrating voice concludes. “So she decided to forget everything and live as a hermit for the rest of her life” (14-15). Ikena’s Utopia, unconstrained by time and society, however, is discovered by Boga, who lifts the vines and finds “to his surprise an entrance to the cave” (15). Actually, it is Ikena who indicates to him the way in, thus allowing him access to her secret space –a prefiguration of the events to come, of her accepting him as a husband and therefore allowing him access to her body.

The happy ending of this reluctant bride finally accepting her husband seems to indicate a mature acceptance of reality on the part of Bagita and her character. For as much as she might relish the timeless, utopian healing experience offered by the cave, Ikena must face her responsibilities. She must find her place in society, which, for a PNG woman at that time, included being married. She seems to have realized that a gentle and caring man like Boga is hard to find (her own brothers have proved that to her) and that she would be a fool to give him up. Just as in the classic Beauty and the Beast story, one has to learn to look beyond appearance. And so Bagita presents her reluctant bride with a fairy tale ending –an ending she

deserves after much suffering, healing, reflection and maturation– while at the same time learning to accept reality.

Coming out of the cave

Readers –at least this European reader for sure– may have expected the two stories that I have considered in this article to openly express their discontent with traditional PNG marriage customs. In her works, Sally-Ann Bagita depicts situations in which their female protagonists find themselves forced, by custom, physical violence, or sense of filial duty, to accept husbands they do not want. Nevertheless, contrary to such an expectation, her works do not so much condemn or call for the elimination of arranged marriages and bride price, as show that a woman can survive in a society where such practices are accepted as customary. In other words, the female protagonists of these works do not so much proclaim their right to marry the man of their choice or not marry at all –but rather prove themselves to be strong enough not to become helpless victims of the difficult circumstances in which they find themselves.

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The two stories that I have analysed seem to suggest that arranged marriages need both the good will of the partners and the efforts of their respective families and communities to work –and in fact, in some cases they do work. But they also point out that differences in upbringing and education do not help establish a good, solid relationship between the spouses. Above all, both works indicate that it is Western influence, which comes with having grown up in an urbanized environment (like Ikena, Boga, and Morea) that will make one reject, or fail to adapt to, the custom. In addition, since an increasing number of PNG citizens tend to move away from villages, the custom of arranged marriages, instead of strengthening a bond between communities, instead of being the logical choice of two clans who bind in marriage two people with similar background and education, becomes more and more a constraint on those involved. In such an event, the consequences will be abandonment, unhappiness, and divorce. Finally, the two stories imply that the meaning of traditional customs is changing, that the traditional bonding of communities in the exchange is decreasing.

While arranged marriages involve both partners as well as the families and communities, and while the husbands' unhappiness is part of the plots, the works that I have chosen especially focus on the women's experience, to show how Melanesian marriage practices specifically affect them. Bagita has both her female protagonists choose to abandon a situation of misery created by arranged marriages –Kiri by returning to her village after her husband deserted her, Ikena by taking refuge in a hidden cave. Kiri is reminded that she should have no regrets, but to

move on with life, away from a city where she would live without her husband, and without the support of her own family. The conventional happy ending of “The Reluctant Bride” leaves readers with the feeling that Bagita – a reluctant realist?– decided to renounce the utopian “cave of her own” and make her protagonist Ikena accept the reality of married life. At least, however, the husband for whom Ikena leaves her happy solitude has demonstrated by his actions to be the sort of non-abusive man one may wish for – a rare gem in PNG, it would appear, where 70% of women are subject to domestic violence.⁷

In neither of these works by a PNG woman writer, in sum, is there ever an open criticism of traditional marriage customs that, from a Western point of view, oppress women and often deny their human rights. There may be several reasons for this. One should first consider that the period 1973-75, when these works were written, was a time when literary production in the country was much more preoccupied with the relationship between previous colonizers and the newly acquired independence than with women’s conditions. And in those times even the description of women’s condition would probably be more immediately useful by limiting one’s scope to what can be achieved in real life. Is it better to picture oneself in a utopian cave or with a utopian career far from family constraints and obligations in a fantastic story with no possible realization, one might ask, or to admit reality, and be content in an arranged marriage with a husband who may not have been one’s choice, might not be attractive or educated, but at least doesn’t bash one up?⁸ But readers could go one step further, and wonder whether Kiri and Ikena, in accepting their arranged marriages, are in fact demonstrating wisdom and maturity by recognizing that the traditional value of community in Melanesian culture is at the very least equally as important as the imported Western values of individual freedom and rights.

Sally-Ann Bagita has shown great courage in writing her fictional works about marriage in Melanesian society. She has given her readers typical scenarios of marriages arranged by families between two people who hardly know each other, who come from different backgrounds, or who may have other attachments. She has demonstrated how different personal or societal constraints compel women into accepting unwanted marital arrangements. She has conceived female characters who refuse to become victims, but take responsibility for the situation in which they find themselves. And finally, although her works affirm the acceptance of a hard reality, she has hinted creatively toward a different, more positive destiny for women. Not all men bash their wives; not every divorce means the end of a woman’s life. And, should one wish for an even more utopian escape, one could always go in search of Ikena’s grandmother’s cave. For surely it is still there, as a source of strength and self-reliance, waiting for another woman to dare to question traditional marriage customs in Papua New Guinea.

Notes

¹. In fact, Sally Ann Pipi (Bagita) is the only woman writer whose work Houbein mentions. Other works by PNG women writers that touch on the same topic include Agnes Luke's story "The Botaras", Sister Jane Ainauga's story "Modern Girl", Rita Mavavi's story "Blackskin, Redskin", Magdalene Wagum's story "An Educated Girl Faces a Problem", Pauline Hau'ofa's play *Brief Candle*, and Christine Mateaku's play *An Educated Girl*.

The task of finding works by PNG women writers was later made easier by a 1996 anthology, edited by Adeola James, which in addition to literary works includes information on, and interviews with, some of the women writers. Most of the anthologised works are originally from the 1980s.

². A brief biographical note on and an interview with Sally-Ann Bagita can be found in James 135-141. Before 1981, the writer published under her married name, Pipi.

³. For a discussion of the changes in marriage in a number of traditional societies and urban settings in PNG, see Marksbury 1993.

⁴. I am grateful to my students Jean Kapi, who translated the names for me, and Ignatius Hamal, who suggested that the name "Ikena" sounds very similar to the words "I can", thus stressing the strength and will power (obstinacy?) of the protagonist. "Boga", he added, sounded a lot like "boar", an animal to which the groom is actually compared in the story.

⁵. A slight difference between the two published versions of the story may give a clue to the reasons for Ikena's unhappiness. In the original publication, Ikena's mother wonders "if it was the new way of life, not the customary way, that was eating the girl's heart" (1974: 4). In this passage, the "new way of life" would be the Western way of thinking (marriage for love), as opposed to the

"customary" (marriage as a bond with a different clan). In the 1994 version, on the contrary, the mother asks herself "if it was the thought of a new way of life, of leaving her customary way, that was eating at the girl's heart" (1994: 12). In this later version, the cause of Ikena's misery would be traced to the sadness of leaving the life that she is used to ("her customary way") for the life of a married woman ("a new way of life"). There is no indication in the 1994 anthology *Moments in Melanesia* as to the reason for the change in the story, or whether it was the author or the editor who changed it.

⁶. The 1974 version is more explicit than the later one on this point. During her time in the cave, while thinking about her situation, Ikena realizes that "there was nothing wrong except that she found it difficult to love Boga" (1974: 5). This line is missing from the 1994 anthologized version. It seems, however, to be quite essential, in as much as it confirms Ikena's desire to marry for love and clarifies the reasons for her final decision to stay with Boga: she has accepted the fact that patience and understanding in a marriage partner approved by the community are probably more important than waiting for a possible love, away from human society.

⁷. "The *Gender Analysis in Papua New Guinea* commissioned by the World Bank states that 70% of women in PNG experience domestic violence", quotes Yawa (2002). Other studies put the figure higher. The Papua New Guinea Law Reform Commission Report 1992 stated in some areas 100% of women were beaten and that one out of six wives living in town had to seek medical treatment for injuries inflicted on them by their husbands.

⁸. The issue of bashing might have been more real than literary. In a country where women are treated as second-class citizens and frequently submitted to verbal and physical abuse, it may be wise of the author to

have avoided a vocal feminist stance. In an interview of 1992, Bagita recognized the need for women writers to address social issues concerning women, mentioning in particular divorce and wife-bashing. In fact, she added that "only a woman can deal with those problems successfully because only a woman

can understand what the other woman feels" (James 1996: 139). However, she explained, "I never used to write about wife-bashing because I knew those men might come and bash me up. I knew a lot of instances but I kept away from writing about that subject. It was not safe" (140).

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