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Sørum, Arve 2017. Bedamini Male Initiation and Marriage as Transformation Sequences. *Anthropological Forum*, 27(1) : 63-76.

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Bedamini Male Initiation and Marriage as Transformation Sequences

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Abstract: This essay focuses on how certain social relations among the Bedamini in Papua New Guinea are given their form through ritual at selected moments of the life cycle when relational transformations occur. Ritualised moments in Bedamini male initiation and symbolic bride capture are described as a dynamic agency that changes the existential conditions of persons in non-ritual reality. At those important ritual moments, the direct presence of the agents is required, while relations between them are mediated by acts, objects and moods. The effect intended is the formation, or reformation, of a relational field. Male initiation and marriage are consecutive parts of a sequence of transformations beyond its constituent moments, as initiation functions as a prerequisite to marriage.

Keywords: Initiation; Marriage; Agency; Gender.

On the basis of her studies of the Ankave, Bonnemère suggests a relational approach to male ritual cycles in New Guinea. As an alternative to the common understanding of initiations as institutions for the reproduction of male domination, she considers them ‘as moments in which a series of relational transformations are occurring that enable the boys’ accession to adulthood’ (Bonnemère 2014, 735). She argues that it is through actions on the relations they entertained with certain persons rather than their individual selves that the boys access adulthood. As a corollary of this approach, she challenges the idea that rituals of male initiation are necessarily based on the exclusion of female actors. Such rituals may enact relational transformations in which women are involved.

In Bedamini male initiation, there is a pronounced emphasis on the relational field into which the boys are thrown. At important turning points in their passage from child to adult, some of these relations are ritually adjusted or changed, other relations are ritually transformed into something else. Importantly, the terms of the relations are always in each other’s presence. The persons involved in a relation always do something to each other to invent, transform or confirm it.

Handelman (2004) argues in favour of re-introducing agency to the ritual process, an ‘agency’ producing ‘effects’ (and as such ensuring that ritual has a ‘function’). I will focus on the role of agency internal to ritual activity as inventive and transformational. Agents have effects on the processes through which relations are given their form. In this connection it is of particular interest to observe that in Bedamini initiation ceremonies many of these agents are female. Thus the analysis of Bedamini male initiation is comparable with similar aspects of the Ankave male ritual cycle. Marriage is the subsequent step on the Bedamini male’s path to genuine adulthood. In male initiation social relations are ritually transformed. In contrast, with a marriage transaction the act itself is the transformational key. A completed marriage transaction transforms a set of substantial (kin) relationships to a set of affinal relationships, while the ritual events associated with the marriage ceremony highlight the giving and taking that is central to the transaction.

Approximately 4000 Bedamini live in the Nomad River area east of the Strickland River in Western Province, Papua New Guinea. Scattered in a shifting number of longhouses each containing between 40 and 100 inhabitants, they subsist on swidden horticulture, hunting and gathering in the border zone between highland and lowland. To the north, their territory borders on the Nomad River. To the south, Rentoul River forms a well-defined boundary. The area consists of an alternating series of low ridges and river gorges. It is covered with tropical rainforest and extensive traces of abandoned gardens. The Bedamini were first contacted by the Australian colonial administration in 1963. The establishment of a base-camp within their territory in 1968 was the decisive step in the so-called pacification of the population. The Asia Pacific Christian Mission was established at Mougulu in the centre of the Bedamini area in 1972. Traditionally, a new longhouse was built every five or six years as part of a settlement cycle due to the requirements of swidden agriculture and prompted by the prospect of upcoming initiation ceremonies. In the mid eighties missionary activity was beginning to influence their lives. Combined pressures from administration and mission led to the construction of more permanent villages based on single-family houses. However, new

longhouses were still being built when the time for an initiation ceremony approached. In the early nineties there were mass conversions to Christianity, representing the culmination of missionary activity in the area. By 1998 male initiation was no longer practiced by the Bedamini.

The Bedamini identify themselves in terms of speaking a common language. The name of the language is “*beda*” while the suffix “*mini*” indicates inclusivity. They recognize a common cultural heritage (*hou*) distinct from neighbouring groups and they are keenly aware of their common identity as against outsiders. In the border zones there is intermarriage with the Gebusi who live west of them and with the Etoro to their east. The longhouse is the nexus of the Bedamini social world. Patri-clans are the only named kinship groups and its members have collective rights of ownership in a specific area. Local groups, i.e. the longhouse and its membership, are at any time associated with such a clan land, in terms of which the land owning clan may be described as ‘dominant’. There is a certain degree of instability in the membership of a longhouse community. Social conflicts or new marriage transactions result in the emigration of some families from the longhouse, but also immigration to it. The construction of a new longhouse is a period of reconsolidation of its membership, and this always coincides with arranging a new initiation ceremony.

The members of a longhouse community mostly consist of males from agnatically related clans and their wives, but the co-habitation of in-laws is possible as well, as a brother of a man’s wife may frequently choose to live with his sister and brother-in-law. The agnatic status of clans and their constituent sibling groups in relation to each other is determined both by a tradition of patrilineal descent from a collectivity of common ancestors and by common intermarriage with other clans, for instance when two men from different clans marry women from the same other clan. *Gavia* is a relation between agnates codified as matrilateral siblingship. It emerges through the fact of two (or more) persons being children of women of the same other clan. People within a clan who share both maternal and paternal substances, are considered to be more closely related than people whose mothers are from different clans. These ideas and practices are functionally equivalent to genealogy as a frame of order, since clan fission tends to follow the cleavages that occur between sibling groups with the fewest matrilateral relations¹ in common (Sørum 1993).

A man has a primary claim on the daughters of his male patrilateral cross cousins as possible spouses, whether the claim is classificatory or genealogically specified. In return, he has an obligation to provide his male matrilateral cross cousins with spouses from among his own, or his brothers’, offspring. Male matrilateral cross cousins are identified as *taiya* (mother’s brother) while female ones are classified as *ame* (mother). These two generations are terminologically merged as senior to oneself, but differentiated in terms of gender. Correspondingly, patrilateral cross cousins will be addressed as *mano*, literally ‘child’, thus terminologically placed as junior to oneself, but not differentiated in terms of gender. (Their children will be classified as ‘grandchildren’). As the terminology indicates, Bedamini cross cousins are not expected to marry each other. In fact, there is a preference for a marriage

¹ Although the context is one of matrilineal descent, see also Whiteley this issue.

between a father's sister's son's daughter and a father's mother's brother's son. They will reciprocally call each other *auwa/aiye* that are the terms used between alternate generations. What is important to emphasize in the present context is that these rules and preferences result in a process of delayed exchange of spouses between clans that presupposes a continuing alliance across generations. Bedamini clans tend to concentrate marriages, and thus political alliances, with a few nearby clans. In fact, there is a broader categorization within the Bedamini population of clans into *fi* (agnates) that do not intermarry and *uda lasu* that are clans that potentially or actually intermarry. The concrete previous network of marriage alliances are taken into account with every new marriage transaction and Bedamini men and women have a more extensive knowledge of the 'flow' of spouses between clans than they have of actual genealogical connections. For the actors on the marriage scene, this concrete network is the empirical material that they have to consider. The important questions concern the claims people have on each other, the possibilities of an exchange and less urgent, the strategic avenues for ensuring spouses for their descendants. It is also important to note that the conceptualization of mother's clan as senior to oneself has consequences for the content of these relations in initiation ceremonies, as women of mother's clan assume the role of protectors and caretakers of the initiands conceptualized as their children.

I have elsewhere described Bedamini male initiation as a comprehensive ritual complex of rites, feasts, ideas, objects and activities that dramatizes the transition of young boys to adult status (Sørum 1982). The initiation ceremony happens subsequent to a ritualised transmission of semen orally from older boys to boys who are not yet in possession of it, and which is conceived as a pre-condition for its production (Sørum 1993). This practice is supposed to grow the boys in actual life and prepare them for initiation and marriage. I participated in a total of 6 initiation sequences from 1972 to 1974, and another one in 1984. The information gathered thus emerged from a close observation of the events as they unfolded and the elicitation of meaning in context from a variety of actors and audiences. The number of initiations observed in succession provided an observational advantage since this enabled me to build on my former experience when attending subsequent ones. In what follows I give a glimpse into some important moments in the ritual process to show how certain social relations are transformed. This unveils the key role of female ritual agency in some of those transformations.

Male Initiation: Initial Events

Bedamini male initiation is organized and staged by a single longhouse community. The ceremony revolves around a number of communal dance feasts (*gosei*, *gafoi*) and spirit séances (*gesame*) involving a large number of visitors from other communities, a wholesale pig slaughter and subsequent distribution of pig meat within and outside the longhouse community, and finally a series of ritual acts directed at, or implicating, the initiands. The proceedings take place within a time span of three to five weeks. Since a relatively small local community arranges the initiation ceremony, there is a significant time delay between actual ceremonies, depending on the number of boys of proper age available. The number of initiands is normally between four and seven. On the average, initiation ceremonies are

arranged every five or six years for any particular community. For the Bedamini population as a whole, there are at least six to eight initiations arranged every year. As a consequence there is a significant difference of age between initiands, the youngest being in their early teens, the oldest beyond twenty years of age. This age difference is explicitly recognised by the Bedamini. Painting their faces in a different style than the junior initiands marks out the senior initiands. Expectations as to how quickly they assume adult responsibilities vary accordingly.

The term for the initiation ceremony as a whole is *goi lægi*, which literally means ‘bound boys’, referring to the initial act of weaving heavy bark wigs into their hair, and metaphorically, tying them together as a unit. On a chosen day, adult males of the community leave for the bush to a grove of *otorobo* trees to fetch yellowish bark material for the initiands’ wigs. Most of it is beaten to a looser consistency with wooden sticks against a log, but some of it is retained in the original form as the cover of the wig. The bark is temporarily hidden in the bush close to the longhouse. At night, while the men drink kava (*Piper methysticum*), a spirit séance, *gesame*, is performed in order to establish contact with ancestral spirits. On this particular night, the women are also awake and in action, making for a mixed audience to the séance which ordinarily is not the case. This fact sets it apart from ordinary séances, contributing to the appearance of the *goi lægi* as a united community effort. In the middle of the night, the initiands are tricked into the men’s sleeping quarters. Some classificatory mothers of the initiands, (who are living in the community in the capacity of *pia* (father’s brother’s wife), leave to collect the bark wig material that has been hidden in the bush. They return silently, running along the wall into the women’s quarters where they dry the bark over the fire. In this way the bark is matured, or ripened, by the female influences and heat. In practical terms, the material loses weight and can more easily be worn by the initiands.

A couple of hours before sunrise the dried bark is distributed among the men who sneak into their own quarters and position themselves in front of the sleeping platform. On a signal, they beat the bark bundles hard on the heads, bodies and beds of the initiands. The silence turns into a mess of sounds and whooping. They are put up against the wall, looking sleepy and confused. The bark is placed in front of them and they are left in peace until the first bird calls. The wig is woven into the hair of the initiands on the longhouse veranda while the eastern sky brightens. All males of the community attend. Women are not allowed to look at this stage. Eventually the long bark bundles reach all the way down to the floor. They are then forced to stand up, which may be quite difficult because of the weight of the bark material pulling at their hair. Some may have to support themselves with a stick. The senior initiands get the heaviest wigs, while the youngest get smaller ones. The bundles are cut just below the shoulders, resulting in a comparatively flat wig covering the back of their heads and the neck.

The men run down to the communal section of the house, twanging their bowstrings. The women look eagerly towards the narrow doorway. The initiands are marched out of the men’s section and lined up according to height on the front porch overlooking the communal section. The initiands’ sisters start dancing in front of them. After a period of looking in

silence, senior male relatives (and some of the mothers) instruct them loudly on proper ways for adult men to behave. The initiands are harshly scolded. They are told they are not yet what they believe themselves to be. To tie the wigs on the initiands, the Bedamini say, is like 'opening their ears'. The main themes of these messages concern sex, garden work, food and social solidarity. It is always emphasized that they should protect and take care of their sisters and brothers.

The tying of the bark wigs generates two important and permanent interpersonal relations. Each initiand has a mentor, normally a father's brother, who stands for his initiation. He leads the wig tying on his own initiand and from this moment they will reciprocally call each other *tara*. This relationship becomes a close one, lasts for life, and involves mutual help and support. The initiands themselves will reciprocally call each other *sama*. Boys who have been initiated together in the same community have a relationship of strong solidarity. They have virtually been 'bound together' for life. The term is subsequently extended to other boys who have been initiated in the same festive season. The season for performing initiations is in the months subsequent to the ripening of the root crop gardens.

The twilight between day and night is usually the time for the ritualised arrival of visitors to a large scale dance feast (*gosei*) that will go on throughout the night. This is the Bedamini equivalent of the Kaluli *gisaro* described by Schieffelin (1976). Some male visitors will perform as dancers and lead singers. A male choir will tune in repeating the song lines composed for the occasion. In addition, there will be one or two female choirs performing songs they themselves have composed. The initiands are lined up in front of the longhouse, and as darkness descends, bamboo torches light them up. In the yard, the women of the host community perform a song and dance play (*siogoi*). *Siogoi* is imagined as the imitation of the play of birds of paradise in the treetops, a play that is thought to represent enticing young female spirits, which may be embodied in the birds. *Sio* is the term for 'birds play', *goi* means 'boy, young man'. *Siogoi*, then, is the teasing play put on by women to attract the attention of young men, on a spiritual as well as a human level of existence. The dancing women move forwards and backwards with graceful, slightly jumping steps, at intervals stopping with a swaying movement up and down by bending their knees. They sing songs composed by a lead singer, the other women repeating the words, or providing a two-note phrase as background vocals.

This sight, and the vocal sounds, arouses the men sexually. The songs are invariably sad, often recounting unobtainable or unrequited love, providing an air of longing easily transmitted to those who listen. The sounds of *siogoi* reach into the surrounding jungle where excitement grows steadily among waiting groups of visitors. The visiting women arrive first. They materialise at the edge of the front yard, and silently enter the longhouse through the women's doors, heartily greeted by the women of the host community. The men's arrival is in the form of a series of mock attacks by separate local communities. Hundreds of visitors to the ensuing *gosei* armed with bows and arrows, symbolically attack the longhouse and the initiands. The animosity is resolved by a large-scale distribution of tobacco by the initiands to all male visitors from bamboo pipes carried in the new string bags with which they have been provided.

Male Initiation: Final Events

The initial events of the ceremony are followed by a period of roughly three weeks, in which the initiands can mingle relatively freely with other community members, while growing more and more marginal as dirt accumulates on their skin due to a taboo on washing. There are a series of food taboos to be observed as well. The condition of marginality does not imply the forced physical separation of the initiands from the community. There is a symbolic separation of the initiands through successive acts of making them identical as a unit as against the community. Marginality is gradually *invented* in the course of the proceedings. This marginality in relation to the rest of the local community is resolved by the final ritual events, through which a relational transformation can be effected.

The final phase starts with the lifting of the taboo against washing, when they are led by their *tara* to a nearby stream. The ritual bath entails a final discarding of the 'old', stripping the initiands naked 'like children', in order to dress them up as adults. The afternoon is spent on the veranda decorating and dressing them. At nightfall they are led to the front section of the longhouse where they are lined up as they were in the morning when their bark wigs were tied to their hair. This time they make a totally different impression. They have been endowed with the most beautiful attire the Bedamini can imagine. In fact, the difference is striking; something has been done to them in a very concrete sense. All are wearing the same outfit, giving the impression of identical impersonality. Every part of the outfit is given by a specific relative, agnatic as well as matrilineal.

Some of the gifts establish a new, lasting and reciprocally named relationship between the giver and the recipient. The initiands wear a necklace of multiple bark fibre ropes called the *gisegisu*. These are given to them by 'mothers' (*ame*), in this case mother's brother's daughters. All women of mother's clan of her own and succeeding generation, that is, the daughters of their brothers, are classified as 'mother'. The ensuing relationship is called *kagome*, and becomes a close one. It may be extended to the sisters of the same clan as the girl who actually gives it, and one of them will take over the responsibilities of a *kagome* relationship if the actual *kagome* dies. By tying a *gisegisu* around the neck of her initiand, the mother's brother's daughter takes the responsibilities of a true mother towards him, and he takes on the duties of a son towards her. The *gisegisu* itself is conceived as an amulet against sickness, and is usually worn by adults of both sexes.

A clanmate of his father's generation gives a palm spathe belt (*pulu*). The ensuing relationship is called *pulu* as well, and mainly implicates the obligation of mutual assistance. The 'bark belt' is fighting gear, but it is also commonly worn in everyday life. The lower part is painted dark red, while a thin rope of split cane has been twisted around the upper half. It is given by the initiand's *tara*. As we have seen, the *tara* also leads the tying of the wig on his initiand, that is, 'binds' him just as he ties the cane around the belt.

These specific relations are created in the same way as interpersonal relationships in general. They are symbolised in terms of sharing an object or experience from which it is perceived as emerging (Sørum 2003). However, there is a significant difference. The object is given, but it is not shared. The relation is asymmetrical, modelled on the seniority aspect of a kinship relation, and as inevitable and lasting. The mentoring functions of the givers signal seniority.

The novices are passive recipients to be mentored, a capacity signalling junior status. Significantly, only the *sama* relation – between co-initiates – is modelled on a genuine sharing on equal terms, replicating a personal friendship.

Establishing the *kagome* relation may be seen as a symbolic act emphasising the continued interest of a clan in the children of their female members. Most women who perform tasks directed at the initiands, except for the celebratory dancing, are classified as mothers. The key persons involved in ritual action in male initiation are females of mother's agnatic kin and, for the most part, males of father's agnatic kin. The involvement of these persons doubly expresses the complementarity of male and female, of mother's blood and father's semen for a boy's physical and social maturation.

The initiands are positioned in a line on the front porch. At this point, there is a series of public moral lectures by senior men, and an occasional senior woman (an actual mother), who scold the initiands, sometimes accompanied by a drummer. Angry imperatives are flung at them. These are lectures on the ways and duties of adult men, interestingly stressing the necessity of both marrying and taking care of their sisters. The themes are mainly those that appeared in the similar event at the time of the tying of the wigs, now with less emphasis on what they were not, and more on what they will be.

Then the mentors (*tara*) in turn sneak up behind the initiands. Without warning the mentor stamps his foot on the floor, shouts, and hands his novice a black palm bow and a bundle of newly carved arrows. The scene is repeated until the initiands cling onto as many arrows as they can hold. Lots of other men than the *tara* will also give them arrows. The content of the ensuing relationship, *tadiusu* (*tadi* is the general word for arrow), pertains to solidarity in conflicts. The arrows are the main tools of the Bedamini warrior and hunter, and a prime symbol of maleness. Arrows are explicitly associated with virility. The words for arrow tips may be used as metaphors for an erect penis, and to 'shoot with an arrow' is a common metaphor for copulation.

The arrow giving sequence, *tadiusuga*, is the central act generating the transition of the initiands into adult status, in fact both symbolically and actually bringing this about by providing them with the necessary equipment. One kind of bone tipped arrow is carved in a radically different style than the rest. It is called the *samogæi*. It is exclusively made for initiands. The abstract carvings on the *samogæi* arrow are called *molobi dola* (the oval stone of the *molobi* fruit), which is a conventional metaphor for the female sexual organ. To Bedamini men (and women), arrows are saturated with associations of sexuality. When the giving is completed the initiands are left with one *samogæi* each. For the rest of the initiation ceremony, they will hold on to it every time they are lined up. The *samogæi* ultimately confirms the *sama* relation, and they may even exchange these arrows between themselves after the end of the ceremony. Thus they all receive a concrete object as a referential point for their interrelation as equals.

At daybreak there is a wholesale pig slaughter, while the initiands are led into the forest, where a small makeshift shelter has been constructed for this purpose. Here they will spend most of the day accompanied by their mentors, performing rituals expressive of strength acquisition. Finally, their bodies are painted all over in a brilliant red ochre, signalling

maturation (and beauty). A group of young women have been sitting some distance away, but within sight, from the bush shelter. They are mother's brother's daughters (*ame*) of the initiands. Some of them are also *kagome*. Their presence is explained in terms of the content of the *kagome* relationship. 'Are they hungry,' they ask themselves, 'are they sick, or alive at all?' They are there to look after the initiands, like good mothers do.

One or two men, agnatically related to the initiands, have also been painted red in the bush shelter. They wear a headdress of large white cockatoo feathers, also worn by male drum dancers. On the chest there is an oval or rhombic painting in black, representing a vulva. Representations of the new moon are painted on both the shoulders and the legs, while a small crescent shaped fragment of a pearl shell is tied to the beard. These figures are called *kenonie* – the term for the new crescent moon. When the sun closes in on the western horizon, the *kenonie* start dancing towards the longhouse yard. On the track they are greeted by singing women dressed up for *siogoi*. They all dance back and forth across the yard for a while. The *kenonie* sway up and down like all male dancers do, but when moving forwards or backwards, their steps mimic those of the female *siogoi*.

The presentation of the initiands to a wider audience than a local community now is initiated by leading them in a procession from the *outside*, not from the inside, to be lined up in front of the community. The *kenonie*, as the (male) new moon and his entourage of dancing and singing women, has brought the initiands in their changed state out of the wilderness to the community of men. The event is approximately timed with the advent of the new moon. *Kenonisi* means to 'start (a sequence of events)'.

The presence of 'mothers' close to the bush shelter, and the female aspect of the *kenonie*, as seen by the drawing on the chest, his skirt and some of his dancing steps, emphasises the maternal and female medium of growth. The male aspects, as his own person, his similarity to a *gafoi* dancer, as well as his association with the moon, emphasise paternal and male influences on growth. The complementarity of the sexes in every enterprise of this sort is perhaps the most striking part of it. I think the *kenonie* figure embodies and connotes this complementarity, as he is designed as a mixture of male and female in appearance, dress, movements and drawn representations.

The initiands have been realigned in front of the longhouse. As the last rays of the sun colour the trees, the mock attacks start. Wave upon wave of warriors storm the longhouse, running past the initiands who, in the midst of the extreme commotion, remain calm and immovable. It is also a way of displaying courage, and the hostility implied by the mock attacks is often on the verge of being real enough. Throughout the night up to fifteen male visitors perform in a drum dance (*gafoi*), each dancer surrounded by four women from the host community performing *siogoi*.

The act of tying wigs on a set of boys sets them apart to be presented as a unit, a 'setting apart' which precipitates a series of acts of collectivisation (Wagner 1975, 42-59; Strathern 1988, 13-15) which gradually invent or create them as initiands (lining up, the lectures, outfits, the gifts, the arrow giving sequence, the painting). In the process, a specific Bedamini adulthood is *gradually* substituted for childhood according to Bedamini *hou* (custom, law). This is perceived as differing from the adulthood of the neighbouring Gebusi and Samo

(Shaw 1990) that arrange comparable initiation ceremonies. The initiands are invented as symbolic figures of (male-dominated) community life. As Telban (1997, 316-318) describes for the Ambonwari, they are thrown into a life world of transformed and prospective relations. Being an accomplished unit apart in their seclusion hut, they are fitted out for a return to the world at large in the form of a procession and are re-included in the community in a line up *with* it in a final presentation. This event makes obsolete the outfit that identifies them as separate, and the bark wigs are discarded. The tying and untying of the wigs is the on-off switch, between whose different positions the festival is situated. The initiands experience a *communitas* that magically affects the community and the wider social network of which it is part, an all-inclusive *communitas* that materialises in the succession of celebratory dances and feasts.

From Initiation to Marriage

At this point, it is expedient to return to the pig slaughter that took place in the morning subsequent to the arrow-giving event. The distribution of pork takes place early at night, before the dancing starts. The pig donors search out predetermined shares for the guests. The out-married sisters of the pig donors to the feast receive by far the largest shares. Half a pig may be put in front of some of them. Next morning the pork is brought to the communities where the sisters live, to be redistributed among members of their husbands' agnatic kin. The gift is part of on-going transactions between partners to a marriage, and the pork accordingly is given, through the sisters, to members of the clans into which the sisters of the donors are married, i.e. from the 'wife givers' to the 'wife receivers'. Since they practice a kind of delayed exchange of spouses between clans, the pork distribution is important to the initiands who may expect a wife from one of the clans into which their father's sisters married.

It is clear that women have a most significant role as the embodiment of the relations between groups at any level of inclusiveness, and they do influence these relations by the performance of that role. Their part as the main recipients in the pork distribution is both a practical and a symbolic recognition of this fact. Marriage relations are confirmed by the transactions of pork. The particular form these transactions take put the recipients of women under an extra pressure to 'compensate' with another woman, particularly if the number of women exchanged is unequal. Since initiation is a prolegomenon to marriage, the pork distribution is a central event in the overall proceedings.

It is repeatedly stressed to the initiands that the initiation ceremony is preparatory for their marriage. This is immediately relevant for the most senior initiands, since men are mostly well into their twenties before they are able to marry. By that time they will have acquired the practical skills and necessary knowledge for assuming adult responsibilities. Young men will take part in activities like hunting, gardening and house building from an early age. They will also take part in spirit seances, acquiring knowledge of magic and ritual. Such skills are acquired through growing up in a transparent longhouse with the communal way of life this implies, not primarily by being the focus of a ritual event like male initiation. The younger initiands will in reality have many years ahead of them before they can marry.

I have already touched on the significance of the virile *samogæi* arrow. These arrows as symbolic objects reveal marriage as the inevitable outcome of initiation and adulthood. This association is inherent in the concept of *samogæi* itself, the source of which is the verb *samogæ*, which means to ‘abduct (women)’, that is, it refers to a custom of symbolic bride capture. Arrows are practical equipment for hunting and warfare, but they are also symbolic equipment for ‘capturing’ women. The significance of the gift of an arrow is now clear. Having it in his possession, the initiand will symbolically ‘take a woman’ with it. In the means of providing food and fighting an enemy, there is also the means of obtaining a woman.

However, there are a few Bedamini men who never were initiands. The reason is that they were already married when an initiation ceremony could be arranged at their home community. This fact clearly shows the close relation between the initiation ceremony and the capacity, or potentiality, for marriage. It is a sign of the growing maturity of which the initiation ceremony is both a medium and a celebration. If the young man has already ‘captured’ a woman, the provision of that equipment is obsolete; his participation as initiand in an initiation ceremony is not called for. The intention that triggers a *goi lægi* is self-completed, growth has already reached its conclusion. Due to the time delay between ceremonies, these men have reached an age where marriage is an immediate option, in particular if they are betrothed to girls who also have reached marriageable age. Their position as non-initiated does not prevent them from claiming a girl they may have been betrothed to for many years and for whom parts of the bridewealth may already have been given away. The experience of being initiated together that generates a close relation of friendship and solidarity, is the main thing they will miss. If still unmarried, there are men who join the last stage of an initiation ceremony in another community for having this experience. The reasons for participation as a *goi lægi* are given by the reasons for non-participation. By knowing why some men are not initiated, we can see why the others have to be initiated. This is important as a process of cultural experience. The completeness of the transcendent few makes it possible to perceive the lack in those on the way. It gives participation in a *goi lægi* a sense, a direction, as well as a gradual immersion in innumerable cosmological references.

As a boy is transformed into a man, a giver is transformed into a taker, and a passive dependent is transformed into an active provider. This pattern actually replicates what happens in delayed spouse exchange. Marriage transforms individual relations between persons and collective relations between groups. The Bedamini term for marriage is *uda-lasa* (from the verb *uda-laa*, which means ‘to take a woman’). The concept of marriage as a kind of taking expresses the fact that a man has a rightful claim to a woman. She is ‘owed’ and can be taken away. This is also clearly expressed in the marriage ceremony itself, which is initiated by a symbolic bride capture.

There is a significant age difference between prospective spouses. While men rarely marry until well into their twenties, girls are normally ten to twelve years of age when they marry. Some may be a couple of years older, some even younger. Bride capture is agreed on in advance by the parties to the marriage, but its exact timing is not known. The girl’s parents

have prepared their daughter for the event, and she has been aware of what is going to happen. Besides, she has seen bride captures before. As darkness descends on a longhouse, a party of men armed with wooden clubs from a nearby community emerges from the forest and shouting fiercely rushes towards a longhouse. Its inhabitants grab their own fighting sticks and a mock battle develops in front of the longhouse. Meanwhile a woman, who has come with the raiders, enters the house through the women's entrance. She grabs a young girl and drags her to the bush. Her mother and her brothers try to follow, but are stopped by the raiding party. They hit violently at the numerous raiders, but in vain. The frightened cries of the girl become fainter. The raiders withdraw, and disappear among the trees, shouting triumphantly. The girl's mother is left crying at the fireplace.

Next afternoon the wife givers approach the longhouse of the wife takers. The women wait in the bush, while the men, armed with bows and arrows, silently walk to the front yard. The girl's father steps aside and shouts for attention. He makes a short speech. The takers now have his daughter, they should treat her well, and his own clan now demands a girl in exchange before another is given. Inside the longhouse, a meal of taro, bananas and sago is served to the guests. During the night, there is a marriage feast in the form of a *gosei* dance and a significant amount of kava is consumed. In the morning, great quantities of food are given to the parents of the girl. Back home, they sit down, mourning her aloud.

The counter gifts subsequent to the 'bride capture' are conceived as a kind of compensation payment for the grief induced through losing the girl, counteracting the possibility that the grief turns into anger. It is not conceived as a compensation payment for the recruitment of a woman's children into the clan. Apart from the food, the bridewealth consists of valuable objects like pearl shells, necklaces, dogs' teeth headbands, axes and live pigs. This is not presented en bloc, but from betrothal onwards to the actual marriage ceremony. Later on, before the full consummation of the marriage, the girl prepares food she has grown as a gift to her husband, and they eat it together.

As a marriage transaction is a privileged moment for the identification and definition of self and others, these moments of giving, taking and sharing have consequences beyond the interrelation of the immediate parties to the transaction. A completed marriage transaction transforms a set of substantial (kin) relationships into a set of affinal relationships. Affinal terms of address are reciprocal, emphasizing the implicit qualities of the relationship that rather than the category of person. These relations are constructed in the same way as relations of siblingship and friendship, and they are expressed in a similar way. The point is that some object, in this case a person, is somehow 'shared' by two parties (Sørum 2003). The relation between brothers-in-law is emotionally close and important in connecting sibling groups from different clans to each other on a long-term basis.

Conclusion

Bedamini male initiation and bride capture are part of an ordered sequence of relational transformations. Initiation is a prerequisite to marriage, allowing for initiation and marriage to be perceived as a coherent set of acts. For a man, his initiation signals an incipient

transformation of the relational field into which he has been thrown, creating the seeds of a more personalised network. His marriage is the occasion for the subsequent creation of a personal network of affinal and agnatic relations. In due time, this network is strengthened and widened by his increased influence in discussions of the betrothals and marriages of his younger siblings and clan mates and eventually of his own children. A gradual gain in seniority accompanies these passages and beyond. Eventually, he will have a key position in the politics of marriage. In ritual, as well as in cosmology and actual social life, there is complementarity between male and female on many levels. In the *goi lægi* (initiation ceremony), women are integral to the ritual action, not merely an audience to be impressed by male power. The complementarity of the sexes is stressed through ritual agency on their part. Females are not initiated, a fact that emphasises the different positions of men and women, but also suggests an original identity difference of gender.

A relational field is transformed, but some of the persons involved have changed as well. This is an intended effect. I have elsewhere (Sørum 1993) explored the Bedamini perception of the self, and in particular the transformations that occur throughout the life cycle, in reality and in ritual. I refer the reader to this work for a comprehensive reading of the Bedamini version of Melanesian personhood. However, the theme of how the concept of the self in Melanesia can be understood as a composite of the relations into which it is cast is highly relevant to the present discussion. Strathern suggests that in Melanesian thought a person may generally be perceived as a microcosm of social relationships (1988, 131) and thus as a multiple composite, bounded and complete (Strathern 1993). Specific gender then is a consequence of differentiation, or decomposition, of the whole; that is, it is a question of making the person incomplete. The complementarity, on which much of social life is based, is actually created in practice by the way specific gender identities are differentiated in terms of each other. In Strathern's (1988, 1993) terms, what is complete in the sense of being a composite whole must from a Melanesian point of view be made incomplete, in the sense of being decomposed, in initiation ceremonial and/or through other practices.

This framework is not applicable to the analysis of Bedamini male initiation, where the focus is on the transformation of relations, as is the case with the Ankave (Bonnemère 2014). The point of Bedamini male initiation is to prepare youths for the adult status that marriage confers. The fact that it is possible for some men to forgo the initiation altogether by marrying, is strongly indicative of this, as is the importance of the pork distribution. There are no acts or events in the ritual proceedings that focuses on rendering initiands incomplete in the sense advocated by Strathern (1993). The person as such is not ritually decomposed while alive. As with the Ankave (Bonnemère 2014) there is a final decomposition subsequent to the death of a person. In the Bedamini case, this is very concrete. Traditionally, the corpse is placed on a small platform outside the longhouse. Exposed to the elements, the soft tissue inherited from the mother decays and vanishes. The hard bones inherited from the father remain to eventually be placed in a burial cave or, lacking that, in the forked branches of a tree known to be visited by ancestral spirits. As living beings, Bedamini males and females share a basic constitution in their selves in terms of male and female substances from which their bodies are constituted. In the initiation ceremony this composite is concretely manifest in the *kenonie* dancer bringing the boys out of the forest to the longhouse. The performing

drum dancers, who are the epitome of male beauty, also have a representation of a vulva painted on their chests. However, the recognition of the presence of both male and female substances in a person does not imply a conception of an original androgynous entity that has to be decomposed in order to produce a gender identity. Along with an explicitly recognised biological difference of small children there is a universal, cosmologically based, gender difference already there. As a concrete manifestation of the difference, infant girls are provided with a small skirt when brought back to the longhouse from a birth shelter in the bush, while boys run around naked until five or six years of age. The ontological 'difference that makes a difference' is that of gender. In humans, the complete composite is always the two opposed, but complementary, gender identities. In male initiation the complementary composite of male and female as actively distributed and shared may be perceived as a microcosm of social relationships. Still, neither boys nor girls are complete as reproductive persons or gender identities. Men are ritually made into such persons; women innately become such persons at the inception of menstruation, when they are secluded in the women's quarters of the longhouse.

The initiation ceremony contributes actively towards the generation of local solidarity in a social situation where this is not at all self-evident. There is no congruence between the male members of a descent group and a local community, and there is a pervasive instability of local group membership, which is related to modes of conflict resolution and patterns of shifting cultivation. A high degree of mobility lead to a stress on in-group male solidarity. Male solidarity within a local group is not a virtue that has to be confirmed, but a phenomenon that has to be continually invented. Ritual has a decisive part in this, being instrumental in producing it. Initiation ritual directly impinges on actuality through its impact on the substance of certain key social relations, basically strengthening their initial importance. In marriage, the social fact of marriage strategies does the trick, while the ritual events highlight the giving and taking that are central to it.

In life crisis rituals there is a dynamic integration within a larger process consisting of the context within which the ritual is enacted. Relations are changed and adjusted, but the social system and cosmology as such are not transformed, except for changes accumulating in the long run. The ritual process itself is dynamic in the sense that transformations are innate to it. Ritual has the potentiality to change the existential condition of persons in non-ritual realities. In the Bedamini ritual gathering, the performance of ritual affects the organisation of perception and thus transforms the experience of the participants.

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