THE WOMAN WHO RAN AWAY: GENDER, POWER, AND PLACE AMONG THE ATBALMIN OF THE WEST SEPIK, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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The story of a young woman's elopement frames an analysis of differential social power of women among the Atbalmin people of West Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea, during the early to middle 1980s. The elopement highlights- several dimensions of social difference not reducible to men's domination of women. The first is inequality among men, which had much to do with men's emphasis on male dominance over women. The second dimension is inequality among women, which informed countervailing assertions of female primacy. I focus here on the second dimension. I argue that differences in power and prestige among women have played a crucial role in Atbalmin social life, affecting how communities have been established as well as how they have thrived or declined. Though oriented toward the case of a particular society during a particular period, this article arguably holds implications for other times and places.

ON 3 JANUARY 1985, while I was in the midst of my research among the Atbalmin people of New Guinea, Ankon ran away.[1] Ankon was eighteen years old, a tall and slender woman who was still unmarried. She lived in a settlement only fifteen minutes' walk from the one where I was staying. Dutip, her female cousin, told me that Ankon had been attracted to a man named Bokban whom she had met at a drumdance several days before. Ankon and Bokban had apparently decided to marry, although he was from an area a full two days' walk away and he already had a wife (monogamous marriages were preferred by most women). Knowing that her family would object to the marriage, Ankon had covertly fol-

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lowed Bokban just after he had left for his area. But her father had soon discovered her absence. Guessing what had happened, he caught up with her along the trail the same day. After striking her several times, he brought her home.

Actions like Ankon's were not uncommon among the Atbalmin. As I learned, they even had a special term for what she had done: ***namal unemin,*** which roughly translates as "going for reason of desire." Such actions, however, tended to be opposed deeply by the woman's own community. People told me it was better for a woman to follow the advice of her family and relatives and to marry close to home. Local marriage was, in fact, a much more common practice, and it was what people had expected for Ankon. Arrangements for such a marriage had been taking shape for Ankon for almost a year, led by her father, mother, elder brother, as well as several relatives. So when she was brought back from her failed attempt at elopement, people made a concerted effort to prevent her from leaving again. They also took the event to indicate a need to dissuade other unmarried women from eloping. Ankon and the other women were subjected to repeated lectures by their families. In addition, they were made to attend several meetings where local leaders told them they should marry locally, taking heed of wise advice from their family and elders.

These efforts did not appear to convince Ankon. Dropping by at my house on January 13, she gave me her own account of the events, ending with a description of the recent meetings. The other young women, she said, had tearfully promised they would marry locally. "But," she added pointedly, "I said nothing." I later learned that Ankon had expressed herself more openly that day to her female cousin Dutip. "There are no men in this area I want," she had said. "I only want Bokban." The next day Ankon ran away for a second time. This time she foiled attempts to stop her from reaching Bokban's settlement.

Ankon's elopement caused problems for many people across a surprisingly wide area. Within her own settlement, Ankon's mother cried and her other family members seemed genuinely sad. Her loss was also felt by several young men in neighboring settlements who had been hoping to marry her. To help their cause they had been giving gifts to her relatives. My main assistant, for example, had given Ankon's father a pig. Within a few days of the elopement, various explanations began to circulate. According to one account, Ankon had found Bokban so irresistibly attractive she had simply "lost her mind" ***(finang denim)*** over him. A more critical assessment was that she had been selfish and foolish, a condition that some felt was true of all young women. Two other explanations, involving spells, were circulated more confidentially. Ankon's flight was said to have been caused by a spell made

by a young man who was a spumed suitor or by a different spell spoken by an older, married man.

Within a few days of Ankon's departure, efforts were under way to retrieve her or at least to gain some compensation for her loss. The failure of these efforts led to anger, mutual insults, fears of sorcery, and threats of violence between the people in Ankon's area and those living in the area where she had gone to stay. In addition, Ankon's elopement led to conflicts at the local level. The young men who had hoped to marry her demanded that their gifts be returned or compensated for. Young unmarried women were pressured to conform to the wishes of their families and marry locally, and their actions were watched closely.

Ankon's actions also caused a great deal of unhappiness to herself. This became clear when she returned five months later, in May 1985. Her official reason was that Bokban's first wife had prevented the marriage from taking place. But confidentially people said that Ankon had been badly mistreated. Given these allegations, I was surprised when Ankon's family ended up paying compensation to Bokban as well as to several men in her own area. These payments did not end the problems caused by her elopement.[2]

The Problem

Ankon's story is notable for its apparent contradictory implications. On the one hand, it suggests that young women had a very subordinate position in Atbalmin society. Ankon tried to escape efforts by her family to determine her life only to find herself in a position of even greater subordination to a group of unrelated people. On the other hand, Ankon's case suggests that a young woman's choices could have a great impact on others. Ankon's elopement influenced hundreds of people over many months.

In this article, I will try to explain how and why a young woman could be both weak and powerful. In the process, I will deal with several related contradictions in Atbalmin society. The first is that, in a society seemingly dominated by men, women could claim social power and exercise it. The second is that, despite a pattern of increasing influence with age for both sexes, young women could play an influential role in social processes, shaping ties between communities and even, I will argue, determining the creation and survival of communities.

Hence, though my aim is to account for the social meaning of a young woman's actions, I can do so only in the context of a broader social analysis that involves both men and women (Weiner 1976). My argument leads toward a recognition of the central importance of two forms of inequality in Atbalmin life. The first was primarily among men, but was often expressed

in terms of an opposition between men and women. The second was among women, but was sometimes expressed in terms of an opposition between women and men. Both hierarchies were built on issues of age and marriage, but in different ways. The two hierarchies were linked together through several kinds of contestations: among men, between men and women, and among women. Indeed, I will suggest that these dimensions of contestation were fundamental to Atbalmin social processes. These two hierarchies and their associated contestation led, in turn, to alternative ways in which people constructed their "social landscape" (Rodman 1992), one of which emphasized the contribution of men and the other the contribution of women. I will argue that attention to the female-centered social landscape of the Atbalmin offers insights into an issue that has been relatively neglected in anthropological writings: the process by which a human place can initially be created. To better understand this process, I will suggest the usefulness of a concept--well illustrated in Ankon's story--that I call "movement and emplacement."

Atbalmin Society in the Early to Middle 1980s

The people discussed in this essay live in the Star Mountains, a range of high mountains that lies at the border area of Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya. Most of them live in Papua New Guinea, where they are known by the government administration as the Atbalmin. This is a name they have increasingly adopted for themselves, though they traditionally called themselves the Nalumin.[3] The Atbalmin speak a language of the Mountain Ok family and share much in common with other Mountain Ok groups, such as the Telefolmin and the Baktaman. They are one of the more populous of the Mountain Ok groups, with a population in the 1980s of about three thousand, spread across an area of more than fifteen hundred square kilometers. Their settlements average only three houses and thirty people each, and are often separated by hours or even days of walking.

My understanding of the Atbalmin is based primarily on fieldwork that I carried out among them for three and a half years between 1981 and 1985. For this reason I use the past tense in this essay, even though much of what I have to say may continue to hold true for the Atbalmin in the "present" (1996). At the time of my research, the Atbalmin depended for their subsistence on hunting and gardening. Their main crops were sweet potatoes and taro, and their main game were marsupials, birds, and wild pigs. There was a significant sexual division of labor. Gardening and house building, for example, required many separate kinds of labor that were divided between men and women. Hunting, fighting, and certain kinds of trade were carried out

almost exclusively by men, while women did most of the work of gathering, child care, and the raising of domestic pigs. Men often spoke as if their social contributions were more far important. However, as will become evident in this article, men's claims were contradicted by women and sometimes by the same men in different contexts.

In terms of social organization, ties of cognatic descent played an especially crucial role. Almost all the settlements were organized around small and shallow cognatic descent groups. The core members of settlements were often a set of brothers, along with their surviving parents, wives, and children. This situation reflected a pattern in which most men (70 percent) remained in their settlements after marriage, while most women (73 percent) moved elsewhere--a fact that will play a significant role later on in this article. By tradition, the largest recognized social group was the ***tenum miit,*** a term used through much of the Mountain Ok area that translates as "human origin group." Members of a ***tenum miit*** traced their descent back to a common cognatic ancestor. There were about twenty such groups with an average of 150 members among the Atbalmin, each claiming a sizable territory. Generally, each group had a main settlement and a number of smaller ones. Bomtem, the largest settlement of the Umfokmin ***tenum miit,*** with ten settlements and 290 people, was the base of my research.

The Atbalmin had a significant history of relations with outside groups. They had long been involved in social relations with other Mountain Ok peoples, especially the Urapmin, the Tifalmin, the Telefolmin, the Mianmin, and a people in Irian Jaya they called the Kofelmin (referred to as the Ngalumin by some anthropologists and linguists). They emphasized that their ancestors and traditions had mostly originated from several of these outside areas (especially from among the Urapmin, the Telefolmin, and the Kofelmin). More recently, the Atbalmin had encountered a new group they called the ***tabala:*** people of European origin, who had come to play an increasing role in their lives. Though German parties passed close to their area in 1908, 1911, and 1914, it was not until 1950 that ***tabala*** actually entered the main part of the Atbalmin area. This "first contact" was made by an Australian government patrol that had to walk in for several weeks from the newly opened outpost called Telefomin. During the 1950s there were only two further government patrols. These patrols confirmed the administration's initial impression that the Atbalmin area was sparsely populated, difficult to reach, and unsuitable for economic development. Not surprisingly, the colonial government limited its activities mainly to census patrols every two years, For a few years in the late 1960s an effort was also made to maintain a police post near the Indonesian border, staffed intermittently by several armed Papuan constables brought in and supplied by helicopter.

The period following Papua New Guinean independence in 1975 brought several changes to the Atbalmin area. In 1976 a small airstrip was cleared at Tumolbil in the western Atbalmin area, allowing the opening of an aid post and a primary school. In the late 1970s most of the Atbalmin were converted to Christianity by Papua New Guinean "pastors" from a Baptist mission that had a headquarters at Telefomin. In the same period, a small number of men (fewer than twenty) left the area to work at a coffee plantation in the Mount Hagen area, returning with dramatic accounts of their experiences at the "Company." In 1981 the opening of a multibillion-dollar gold mine at Ok Tedi brought a much larger company near the Atbalmin. Many young men made the weeklong walk to visit the mine, though few stayed to work. Finally, in the early 1980s, refugees from Irian Jaya established communities just across the border, and the Atbalmin began to have increasing ties with these people whom they called 'West Papua."

These developments had significantly broadened Atbalmin perspectives by the time I began fieldwork. The Atbalmin I came to know viewed themselves in terms of the emerging horizons of the nation (and some international locations), capitalism, Christianity, and the West Papuans. However, it would be a mistake to overestimate the impact of these emerging influences on the Atbalmin during the early to middle 1980s. Though they saw themselves as Christians, they continued to maintain strong ties to their indigenous religious beliefs. Though they placed a high value on the airstrip and followed the news of every landing, most lived too far away to use the aid post or send their children to the school. Even those who lived near the airstrip found the airplane too expensive for their own travel or for marketing their crops. Throughout the Atbalmin area, people continued to rely on their own means of subsistence, exchange, social organization, and dispute mediation (except for large-scale fighting, banned by the government).

One of the ways in which the Atbalmin of the early to middle 1980s continued to live much as their ancestors had done involved the social position of young unmarried women such as Ankon. These young women continued to be near the bottom of two social hierarchies, one dominated by older men and the other by older women. In running away to join Bokban, Ankon violated both of these forms of hierarchy.

Men's Power and the Making of a Social Landscape

For a long time I was aware only of the hierarchy among men. Within a few weeks of beginning fieldwork, I had recognized a group of male leaders, one for each settlement. Every Atbalmin settlement had a man called a ***nolmolin,*** coming from the term meaning "to go first." One or two of these, in turn,

were generally recognized as especially important within a local region. All these leaders were married men, usually above the age of forty. Gradually, I came to see further gradations in the hierarchy of men. Below leaders there was a second tier made up of married men of unusual achievements and strong character. The next level was made up of other mature men who were married and had full capabilities. Most men found themselves at this level. The lowest level was made up of unmarried men, who were seen as lacking in essential capacities either because of physical or mental defects or because of youth.

The hierarchy among men was not static but allowed gradual movement with age and influence. Though being a member of the core cognatic group provided some advantage, a man's chances of becoming a leader depended mostly on his own efforts and achievements. The men who were leaders had worked hard to gain their current position. Wealth--achieved primarily through gardening, pig raising, and trade--was an important aspect of leadership. I found that leaders on average had five times as many valuables and pigs as the average man. This wealth was of value primarily because it could be used, along with surplus food from gardening and hunting, to build social relations through delayed exchange. Exchange was crucial in this respect, determining the quality of people's ties even to their siblings, parents, and children (Bercovitch 1994). Male skills in warfare, oratory, and ritual were also understood in exchange terms, as important ways of providing support to others. A man's efforts at creating relations through exchange also demonstrated his fairness and concern for others, qualities seen as essential for his own social ties as well for the common good of the community.

Though men's aspirations to leadership were aimed mostly at building relationships with other men, they also shaped men's relations with women. Given the sexual division of labor, men could not hope to produce abundant food or to raise pigs without the help of women, whether as mothers, sisters, wives, or (to an extent determined by age and marital status) daughters. Men were particularly dependent on their wives, though other categories of women also were important. This dependence made marriage an especially essential condition for men's advancement. Atbalmin men said that the surest way of rising to wealth and leadership was to marry several wives, a position supported by my own findings.

Viewed from the perspective of men's ambitions, women were essential, but they were also a source of problems. Women could, and often did, choose to act in ways contrary to men's wishes. It is not surprising, then, to find a deep ambivalence in the views men expressed about women. I heard men praise women for being strong and fertile, but more often they condemned them for being physically weak. Men also said that women were

mentally weak, suffering from "bad thought" ***(finang mafok)*** and "flaccid thought" ***(finang yimyum)*** that kept them from thinking to the bottom of things, remembering well, or controlling their passions. Women were selfish, considering only the interests of themselves and their immediate families.

Men further told me that women's bodies, especially their menstrual blood and vaginal mucus, would harm them, making them weak and even sick, and rendering them unable to hunt successfully. Men worried about coming into contact with menstruating women, even though the danger was minimized by the practice of women's seclusion in menstrual houses. They also warned women who were not menstruating to avoid stepping over them or their bows. Given these views of women's minds and bodies, it was a serious insult to accuse a man of being "like a woman."

Nonetheless, women were perhaps the most crucial basis of male influence. Unmarried men were, almost by definition, poorer. Though a man's most crucial step was to get married, he found that this required him to subordinate himself even further to others. Besides finding a young woman willing to marry him, he had to get the permission of the woman's family. To do so, he had to rely on the support of many others to plead his case. He also needed help to pay his bridewealth ***(wanang tabi).***

The obstacles to marriage were a constant source of frustration to young men. I often heard them grumble about the unwillingness of people to help them. Among themselves, unmarried men spoke of married men, especially men with several wives, as a privileged group who benefited from their position; and they saw other unmarried men as competitors. During my fieldwork, unmarried men were involved in several cases of real or suspected adultery and many cases of rivalry over unmarried women. Older men and women spoke of the "sharpness" ***(atul)*** and "anger" ***(ol ken)*** of young men as something that needed to be controlled. Religion was seen as a major resource in controlling young men.

Indigenous Religion and Men's Power

At the time of my research, the indigenous Atbalmin religion remained important even though it was being increasingly challenged by Christian missionization. It was a complex system of rituals, myths, sacred objects, and special temples from which women were largely barred and to which men could gain access only through a series of initiation rituals that occurred in sequence and took many years to complete. Almost all adult Atbalmin men had been through the initiation system, and they continued to understand themselves and women in terms of it.

Initiation rituals (and sacred knowledge and practices more generally)

were understood to bring desirable results for everyone, but in a manner that carried particular benefits for men. Without them, I was told (by initiated men as well as by women who knew none of the details of the ceremonies), the gardens and pigs would not grow well, hunting would be unsuccessful, and people would lose their flesh and strength. Also, the rituals worked to transform men into superior beings, who were physically larger and stronger, intellectually superior, and capable of heightened perceptions compared to uninitiated men or to women (Herdt 1981, 1982, 1990). Men gained access to a vast body of special knowledge that they could use for practical ends. The deepest and most powerful knowledge, known only to the oldest and most fully initiated men, concerned an ultimate source, referred to as the ***tenum-wanang miit,*** the "men-women source" (cf. Biersack 1984). The men most empowered were a small group of old men, most of whom were or had once been settlement leaders. As the most fully experienced and knowledgeable in sacred matters, these men embodied the sacred.

The indigenous Atbalmin religion linked differences among men to differences between men and women. Even in the 1980s after Christian missionization had led to the suspension of major initiations, uninitiated boys were still often compared to women, making clear how the transformation of boys into men was also a process that emphasized and heightened the differentiation of men from women (Herdt 1981). This linkage served to legitimize the greater wealth, influence, and authority of older, married men. It made differences among men acceptable by subsuming them in terms of difference between men and women (Rubin 1975; Collier and Rosaldo 1981; Josephides 1985; Godolier 1986). In this sense it built upon but also transformed aspects of everyday life. It provided a spiritual basis for men's claims that they played a more important role than women in social life.

The men's house was a key context where male-centered views were expressed. Every evening that I visited the men's house in Bomtem, I heard stories about dramatic events in which men took the lead: quarrels and battles, rituals, feasts and dances, and the pioneering of new territories. In their conversations in the men's house as well as in other contexts free of women, men told stories that cast women as desirable sexual prey. These stories contrasted deeply with men's actual relationship to women, whose willing cooperation they had to seek in almost every aspect of daily life (cf. Tuzin 1981; Schlegal 1990).

Sometimes, if it was still light, men would go out on the veranda and point out the location of places or persons they were speaking of. Looking outward, I saw the landscape as a record of the actions, ambitions, and desires of men, and particularly of a limited number of male leaders. Women seemed

a kind of resource, over which men had fought and through which men sustained the human world. It was a landscape in which men moved around freely while women were kept in their place.

This male-dominated view of the landscape was further developed in the system of temples. Geographical areas were defined by spheres of influence of various temples, and historical eras were bounded by decisions (always by men) to relocate temples or in some cases to create new ones or abandon old ones. Initiated men had an explanation of how they had come to control the temples. All members of Atbalmin society learn about Fukunkon, the central figure of Atbalmin religion. As even a child was able to tell me, Fukunkon had walked across the land, creating various landmarks, establishing the human groups, building the first temples for them, and giving them most social customs, secular as well as religious.[4] Initiated men, however, also knew that Fukunkon had turned her religious knowledge and powers over to men. Fukunkon, they explained to me, had found that the pigs and the children did not do well when she was in charge of the religion. So she had asked her younger brother to take her place in the temple and to carry out the rituals while she remained in the ordinary house. The results were much better, and since then women had been excluded from much of the indigenous religion. Both men and women said grave consequences, including famine, would occur if women somehow learned about or, far worse, came into physical contact with sacred things. In this way, the religion was a focus of men's anxieties about female pollution, even though men said they received the religion from a female.

Women's Power, Women's Landscape

One of the earliest hints of the limitations to men's exclusive claims to social power was given to me on my first visit to Bomtem. In answering my questions about who were the most important men of the area, the leader not only named several men, but he also mentioned several women. Unfortunately, the odd quality of this reply did not strike me at the time. On the contrary, I turned in the months that followed increasingly toward a view of male dominance, supported by the great emphasis on that view in men's accounts.

Eventually, though, the significance of that early hint became clear. People saw some women as having greater importance than others in society, possessing more valued things, and having more influence and authority. At the top of this hierarchy of women were a number of older women, generally in their fifties and sixties. They were somewhat fewer than the male leaders, since they were not found in every settlement. The leading women were

praised for their many grown children, their success in raising pigs, and their productivity in gardening. They were often referred to as the "mothers" or, if they were very old, "grandmothers" of their community or even of an entire area. Although they had more wealth than most women, wealth seemed less a part of their reputation and authority than it was for men.

Next in prestige and influence among women were a number of individuals in their thirties and forties who were married and had growing children. These women were known to be "strong" ***(yung),*** as indicated by their very successful gardening and the many pigs they owned jointly with their husbands. Indeed, some of these women had more pigs than the oldest, most prestigious women. They also were known for their ability in making netbags, objects of value that were used by everyone but made mostly by women. Below these "strong" women, in turn, were married women with fewer abilities and pigs, and women who had no children because they were newly married or infertile. At the lowest level were some mature women, mostly married, who were lacking strength of body or mind ***(wanang mafok,*** "bad women"). Young women who had not yet married ***(wanang kasel imok),*** like Ankon, were also placed at the lowest level, with the important difference that they were expected to rise upon marriage, the birth of children, and increasing importance in networks of exchange and cooperation.

Differences among women were constructed, in this way, by some of the same factors mentioned for men (cf. Lepowsky 1993). Women, like men, agreed that age and marriage were essential to their social position. Like men, women grew wealthy by being more industrious than others--by raising more crops and pigs and weaving more netbags. Like men, women used food, pigs, and valued objects for building relations through exchange. In addition, much as men gained influence through women, men acknowledged that women could gain influence through men, by persuading a spouse or other male relative to do something or by threatening to refuse to help them. Men tried to limit the extent to which women exercised power through them. A man who let himself be used this way was seen as weak, lacking in manliness. Yet women could turn these insecurities to their advantage. I heard of many cases where a woman incited a husband or son to action by saying, "I'm only a woman; I can't do it," or, more pointedly, "Aren't you a man?"

While all these factors could contribute to a woman's wealth and influence, there were important limitations. Women were at a disadvantage in using exchange to build social ties, because they tended to have less say in the distribution of pork from the pigs they helped to raise and they could not handle the most valuable kinds of objects (dog's teeth and most kinds of shells). Women could not gain the full advantage of other kinds of exchange,

because the long journeys required for developing trade partnerships were considered much more dangerous for women than for men to make (a fact that made Ankon's story all the more notable). The influence women gained through men was equally limiting, for women who used it were dependent on capacities in others that they could never have themselves.

There was, however, another basis for women's power that provided greater possibilities of influence and authority. This female basis of social power made women's differences irreducible to male terms; in contrast to what men may have said in certain contexts, women were not simply at the bottom of the same hierarchy occupied by men. The female basis of social power was alluded to in what men said about the women they respected most: outstanding older women. These women, they told me, made them, fed them, and raised them. The role of the older women had to do with a sense of their being a basis and support of social life. They were seen to be a fundamental source of people, of wealth, and of food. These were the roles people referred to in calling them the "mothers" or "grandmothers" of a community or an area. These views were confirmed by descriptions of the past. Earlier periods were understood in terms not only of who had been the male leaders of the time, but also of who had been the outstanding older women. These women were portrayed as the center of the communities and the reference point of social relations.

Reproduction and Women's Power

This female focus was also evident in genealogies. In contrast to the common emphasis on men's actions and decisions, the Atbalmin usually traced their descent back to a female ancestor. She was, literally, the "mother" of the group. My recognition of the place of women in genealogies of origin led me to explore a more general link between women's social power and their capacity for reproduction. The Atbalmin generally explained reproduction (to me and to each other) in terms of a cooperation between the sexes, such that a man and a woman contribute equally to the formation of a fetus through intercourse.[5] But, in another sense, women were represented as primary. The fetus, I was told, grows within the woman's body and the child is born from it. People went on to explain how, even after birth, women are better than men at helping children to grow larger and survive infancy. In their role of providing a continuing supply of new healthy bodies in the face of death and decay, women ensured the survival of their community. Women were thus understood to be essential to society in a way men were not. Reproduction constituted an area of female dominance that men themselves recognized.

In accounting for women's greater role in reproduction, both men and women emphasized the unique qualities of the female body. They pointed out that women have internal cavities, organs, and fluids linked to reproduction and motherhood. But they understood these physical correlates of women's reproductive achievements as the expression of an internal nonmaterial principle known as ***man fakaman miit,*** "the source of making babies." People used it to account not only for specific aspects of physical bodies, but also for what they saw as women's greater patience and warmth, which made them more successful in raising children and also in raising young domestic animals. Men, by contrast, were seen to lack these nurturing qualities. Indeed, women often criticized men's failings generally along these lines. They said that men were irresponsible, forgetful of others, bad tempered, selfish, and greedy for wealth. Women's greater reliability led them, in their own eyes, to take a greater role in sustaining their community on a daily basis. It is important to recognize how these criticisms of men worked to sustain a notion of female power that could also be used to interpret and legitimize differences among women. The achievement of prominence by some women was seen as proof of their greater possession of this nonmaterial source of power.

Though ultimately nonmaterial in its source, women's power was associated with two specific sites. The first comprised the reproductive organs and fluids of the female body. The second was the small house called the ***sayam*** that was found in every settlement and used by women when they were menstruating or giving birth. On a number of occasions, men told me that this house was women's sacred house ***(wanang imi yawol)*** and that inside it women did their sacred ritual ***(wanang imi awem).*** They drew an explicit parallel between the restriction on women entering the men's sacred houses and on men entering the menstrual house. Men believed that in the women's house, hidden from observation, very powerful forces were unleashed that led to transformative results. Moreover, they linked the menstrual house with a body of knowledge. A number of men told me that women had to know things men did not in order to do what men could not. They were unsure, however, exactly what form such knowledge took or how it was passed on. But, like men's own sacred knowledge, women's ***awem*** was seen as a link with an ultimate source. Moreover, the same term --"men-women source" ***(tenum-wanang miit)*** --was used for this as was used for the source of men's sacred knowledge. This positive power that men attributed to women clashed with the generally negative views of women they expressed elsewhere. Even more curiously, it meant that men most valued in women many of the aspects (bodily substances, organs, and processes; special houses) they feared as most negatively polluting (cf. Wedgwood 1930).

On their part, women tended, like men, to explain their unique reproductive and nurturing capacities as a product of a nonmaterial principle. They drew the same analogy men did between the cult house and the house where they menstruated and gave birth. Older women told me about some myths and rituals they practiced, concerned with menstruation and the care of pigs. But they said they did not conceal these from men. Like men, women thus represented their powers as being based on a kind of knowledge. They linked what they did ***(kukup kemin)*** with what they thought ***(finang sanin)*** and knew ***(kalti kemin).*** This knowing/thinking/doing encompassed and connected internal physical processes (menstruation, childbirth, providing breast milk), technical skills (raising animals, weaving netbags), certain kinds of sacred knowledge, and qualities of behavior (being patient, responsible, concerned). Women, like men, contributed to their social world through the mediation of a fundamentally immaterial and nonnatural principle, internalized as a knowledge that enabled action and that transformed those who knew and used it.

Older women were presumed to be the most knowledgeable. In fact, I found they did have a high degree of expertise in matters of childbirth and the ailments of menstruation. They also had particularly large collections of the objects used in rituals to promote the growth of pigs. Like certain old' men, the knowledge of these women was not simply possessed by them but embodied, meaning that much would be lost no matter how much old women sought to pass it on to other women. And, also as in the case of men, a partial remedy for this inevitable loss was seen in keeping bones of certain women. These bones were looked after by a woman rather than by a man. Only she could also weave the special netbags in which the female relics were kept. This individual was called a "sacred woman" ***(wanang awem),*** and the house she lived in was called the "mother house" ***(am awok).***[6] Traditionally, every settlement that had a temple ***(am yawol)*** also had such a mother house. In the area where I lived, the sacred woman was Nukenip, Ankon's aunt and Dutip's mother. The next in succession, on the event of Nukenip's death, was Ankon's mother.

Women were thought to gain sacred knowledge only gradually through their lives, reinforcing the importance of age already noted in terms of women's life stages. A woman, I was told, gained as much from experiencing reproduction and growing things as from learning various rituals and bits of knowledge meant to help these processes. This embodiment of knowledge was similar to but also different from what occurred with men. I have noted how male knowledge was linked to its effects (Strathern 1988). The process of learning the sacred changed men into different beings, and only these beings could know sacred matters. For women, who had very few rituals,

menstruation, reproduction, and growing things were the main transformative processes. Women who did these things would be transformed; they would become embodiments of female powers. These processes shaped the manner in which people viewed differences among women. Women who were successful in raising children, in gardening, and in raising pigs were understood to be more knowledgeable. They were expected to have unusual skills in midwifery and ritual dimensions of raising pigs, including the use of a special set of objects they kept in their houses.

Marriage, Women's Power, and Place

This approach to reproductive knowledge and practice informed the way in which people viewed young women like Ankon or Dutip. The position of an unmarried woman reflected her potential value to create for herself and others, a value whose magnitude would depend not only on herself but 'also on her marriage. Marriage was a necessary part of the process through which women achieved their particular form of social power (cf. Weiner 1976; Boddy 1989). Through marriage, a woman acquired a relation to a man that encompassed reproduction as well as production. She also acquired a relation that strengthened her claim to the products of her productive and reproductive work. But when a woman married away from her home area, she took with her all her potential creative powers, This accounted for the importance to the group of women's choice in marriage. The social necessity of a woman's creative power was also used to explain the traditional obligation of a group that received a bride not only to pay bridewealth, but also to provide (eventually if not sooner) a woman in marriage to the other group. This was the only way to make up for the loss of a woman's reproductive powers.

To appreciate the gravity of these issues, it is important to keep in mind that the average Atbalmin settlement consisted of only thirty people and lasted only five to ten years. Under such fragile social conditions, a young woman's loss could make a major difference. Indeed, after Ankon's departure people spoke at length about how if other young women left, their settlement and eventually their whole region would be threatened. They remembered all the other women who had ever run away and thought about who else might follow. Their fears indicated their keen sense of the essential social value of reproduction in social life as the key to the origin and survival of settlements, descent groups, and regions.

Alongside their view of the social landscape as a product of men's actions, then, Atbalmin men and women also recognized an alternate view of the social landscape as the product of women's powers. In this view, women

were primarily responsible for the peopling of the world, a process by which a tract of forest was turned into a human ***place,*** that is, an area of settlement ***(abip).*** Here women were cast in the role of moving and men in the role of being "put in place." People also recognized how settlements and regions were connected through their female sources. Most people could claim affiliation to several different groups or areas through their relation to women who had originally come from those areas. Such affiliations played an important role in shaping regional relations between men; indeed, men often retraced the paths of their female ancestors in their long-distance trading. People saw Ankon's elopement, in this way, not just as aberrant behavior on the part of an individual woman, but as an expression of the way in which the social world had been created, the way in which communities had prospered or suffered, and the way in which they would be subject to further change in the times ahead.

The recognition of women's power by both sexes did not obviate men's claims to social dominance, nor did it prevent women from suffering at the hands of men in many ways. But the alternative view of women did contribute to the influence and authority of women, especially older women who were seen to be a social basis of their settlements and regions. More subtly it contributed to the respect and autonomy that was, in fact, granted to women in Atbalmin society. Based on my discussions with women, it seemed clear to me that the recognition of women's positive social power deeply informed women's sense of themselves and of their relations to others. It helped them to see their actions, even when they chose to run away to marry, as positive in significance rather than merely a form of compliance or resistance.[7]

The Social Force of Young Women

When Ankon ran away, it was not only men whom she disappointed, but women too. Most married women in her area, including her mother and sisters, were critical of her action. After Ankon ran away the first and unsuccessful time, they warned her that she had made the wrong choice. They saw their warnings validated in what happened to her when she ran away again. She should have known that a woman who married far away would not have the same support from relatives as if she had stayed at home. She should also have known that as a woman from another area, she was more likely to be mistreated by her in-laws. A woman who eloped would get less help from relatives in the form of piglets to raise or food (to be reciprocated later). Finally, she would not have the same opportunities to learn the knowledge of older women, especially her mother. Since Ankon's mother

was one of the outstanding older women of her area, she had much to gain in this respect.

But older, married women had their own reasons to urge Ankon to stay. To the extent that women's claims to social powers were linked to their role in creating and sustaining a community, they benefited from young women marrying locally. From the position of a mother, a daughter's children are additional embodiments of her own powers. Indeed, some older woman had twenty or more descendants, forming a high proportion of the members of their settlements and a significant part of the population of their area. Married women also worried that their sons would have trouble finding a wife if young women routinely left. This was a serious concern, given that older women depended on their sons and their sons' position depended on marriage.

As I noted before, Ankon's main response to being told she must marry locally was to remain silent. This is not surprising, given that the men leading the meeting would have verbally, if not physically, attacked her for expressing any views contrary to their own. Other people had reason to suspect from this silence that she still hoped to marry Bokban, but they had no real proof. Ankon was far more direct about her intentions with her cousin Dutip, an unmarried young woman whom she could trust. Her caution indicates the categories of people with whom she was most in conflict: men and older women.

Additional implications can be drawn from Ankon's silences. Ankon expressed no doubts that she would be accepted by her intended husband or his family. This confidence probably reflected a sense of her social value as a young woman. She was desirable; but more important, she was a potential source of productive and reproductive powers that would benefit others, her husband and his family most of all.

Further information about the kinds of discussions and thoughts that were occurring before Ankon's elopement is provided by another case, which involved her cousin Dutip. Six months before Ankon's elopement, people in Dutip's settlement of Bomtem conceived a plan to marry her to a young man in the same settlement. Not only would this be a local marriage, but it would ensure a second local marriage, since the man had an unmarried sister whom Dutip's brother could marry. When Dutip did not agree with the plan, several people tried to persuade her. I had separate discussions with each of the people involved about their views of the plan, which they allowed me to record on audio tape.

Dutip, though obviously unhappy with the situation, had only a little to say. "My mother and brother and brother-in-law told me about that [the

plan for her to marry the man]. But as I see it, it is no good to get married at all. So I ignored them. I said: I do not like a man. You are only tiring out your throats telling me this." Dutip's brother-in-law then made a strong case for Dutip to marry, based on a number of social obligations. "I suffered for her sake," he said tensely. "I hunted wild pigs and cassowaries and brought them back to help her grow up. Now that she is grown into a young woman, I would have her marry in her own settlement. Because her mother is old, I would put her in her own settlement, where she could help her mothers garden and her house."

Dutip's brother spoke last and longest. He began calmly by pointing out the general benefits of women marrying locally. "It is bad," he said, "for one woman to go to a settlement here, a second to go to a settlement there, a third to go to yet a different settlement." If that were to happen with Dutip, "the fire in our house would die, for mother is old [and unable to take care of it herself]." It is better, he continued, to arrange a marriage within the settlement, so that Dutip would be exchanged for another woman who would marry Dutip's brother. In that way, he said, "they will give us a woman to come to the house and come inside and light the fire, and we will give a woman in return." He then addressed Dutip's claim that she did not want to marry. "A woman who says she does not like to have intercourse will have no food from her man. She will have nothing and grow old." He concluded with an angry warning that he was losing patience. If his sister continued to resist much longer, he would give up trying to talk and beat her instead.

As the debate over Dutip's marriage indicates, a marriageable young woman was the center of concern of people and groups who sought, in her presence as well as behind her back, to arrange her marriage for her. If, as often happened, the woman was not pleased with these plans, she found it hard and painful to resist. Those making the plans were willing to invoke all her obligations to persuade her. They also could threaten her, less often through violence than through diminishing or severing their ties. It is easy to understand why young women might insist that they had no desire to marry at all. In doing so they sought not so much to remain single for life as to avoid the particular match in question, with the hope of finding a better possibility in the future. This was certainly Dutip's intention, and it worked at least for a while. At the time I left the field, she was still single but had every expectation of eventually marrying.

There was a paradoxical dimension to the situation faced by such a young woman. On the one hand, she found herself being forced by others to act against her own will. Among those acting on her were people upon whom she had always depended and to whom she was deeply obligated. In this situation, she was likely to feel powerless, denied her own choice. On the

other hand, the depth of people's concerns made clear the importance of her actions and choice. Indeed, her choices mattered more than they had ever before and might ever again.

Imagine the alternatives for a young woman. First, she could agree with her family to marry a local man they had chosen. If she did so, she would satisfy her obligations to many people and also gain the personal benefits of their support in times ahead. Such advantages were ultimately identified with collective interests and were embodied in the figure of her mother; the young woman had a chance someday to embody them herself, especially if she stayed in the area and became an influential woman. Second, a young woman could resist marriage plans and insist on staying unmarried. This would be likely to anger her relatives. It also posed the risk, made clear by those same relatives, that she might never marry and might end up living a bleak and impoverished life. The final alternative of a young woman was to elope with a man of her own choice. In doing so, she betrayed her obligations even more profoundly, but had an opportunity to make a positive and immediate choice of her own. A woman who eloped had reason to hope that the harm of her actions would be healed by later events, such as an exchange of women and bridewealth. Even if that failed, she had a chance of building another set of social relations in a new community.

Information I gathered suggested that most women accepted the marriage that was arranged for them, either on the initial occasion or after first rejecting several other arrangements. The relatively few women who had chosen to elope had caused great consequences. As Ankon's case shows, such actions affected the lives of many people over a long period. It led people to take significant actions that altered social relations within their area as well as between different areas. People readily told me about other women who had eloped out of or into their area. These women came to represent, in many ways, the will and desire of young women more generally. They were a recurrent theme of popular stories and songs.

A number of the tensions in Atbalmin society are revealed in elopements. Elopements have been an arena for the struggle between men and women. They have also been an arena for struggles between men, who have enhanced their reputation and wealth through inciting or controlling the movements of women. Finally, elopements have been a context in which the generally hidden tensions between young women and older women have become visible. There is no question that young women who have eloped have generally acted against the interests of their mothers and other married women, and to some extent against their own interests as women who would some day become old themselves.

This tension between young and old women can be traced, arguably, to

the social basis of women's power. A first clue can be found within the image of the mother sitting alone in a house without a fire. This image was used regularly among the Atbalmin as a potent symbol of the bitter and pitiful reality of failed communities. As its use by Dutip's brother shows, it represents above all the outcome when too many young women leave an area. In the process of expressing the importance of the loss of young women, the image also makes clear the helpless immobility of old women. This immobility seems to stand for an essential quality of the community as a whole, which like an old woman has nowhere to go and depends on the movement of young women.

Movement and Emplacement

I found further clues to the significance of tensions between young and old women in Atbalmin genealogies. As I noted before, groups tended to trace themselves back to a female ancestor. Significantly, the place of birth and the descent group ***(tenum miit)*** of the woman or women who founded the group were usually not local. She had married in, usually in her teens or twenties. She had left her original area and group because she was attracted-to a man or because of some disaster at home. Such a view makes the movements of women a positive source for the peopling of an area, the process by which an area becomes a human place.

This is, in part, simply the logic of the system of descent: the person who starts a group must first break with past connections; before there is an origin, there has to be a discontinuity. But this logical truism points to a more interesting social process that helps to account for the seeming contradiction between Atbalmin views of women's movement as both destructive and creative. There was a necessary interrelation between the way women moved and the way they stopped moving to make a place and a human group.

This process, which I term "movement and emplacement," was arguably at the heart of female claims to social power among the Atbalmin. The duality of movement and emplacement was expressed in many areas of Atbalmin thought and action. Men and women drew on it to explain their history. It provided them with a basic form of explanation for how communities originated and how they were related, for why some communities prospered and others did not. It was also crucial to the way people interpreted current events and anticipated their consequences. Each marriage was a struggle over a young woman's movement, involving many people and groups. These included young men who hoped to marry her, old men who benefited from mediating such marriages, older women who gained additional "children,"

and the unmarried woman herself. There were attempts to control women's movements through a variety of means, including the use of rituals and spells. The purpose of all these plans was to set a woman into the position of making a place, in which she would stay to raise many pigs and gardens, to have many children, and so to increase the numbers and wealth of her community.

There is an interesting parallel between the social process of movement and emplacement of Atbalmin women and the character of the chief figure in their religion. I have noted that Fukunkon was described to me as the "mother" or "grandmother" of everyone. But there was actually considerable ambiguity about her age and marital status. In one of the narratives known best by both men and women, Fukunkon traveled alone and was approached by an "old man" who was attracted to her and wanted to have sex. This seems less the predicament of an old woman than of one who is young and unmarried. That Fukunkon is not an old woman is also suggested by narratives, known to initiated men as well as to many older women, about how Fukunkon had traveled through the land, leaving traces of her menstrual blood. The myths known only to initiated men provide much more detail but do not resolve the ambiguity. Most of them seem to be describing a woman who was young enough to bear children but was unmarried, in the sense that she did not live with or work for any man. Yet some other narratives describe an obviously very old woman, who presided over a sacred place and eventually died there, leaving her ritual knowledge and bones to men. In talking to people, I got the sense that they did not resolve these different perspectives in terms of different times in Fukunkon's "life," but took them to indicate something about her inherent qualities. Indeed, I was told by older men that until the 1950s it was common among the Atbalmin to suspect that Fukunkon might still be living in the temple at the main settlement of the Telefolmin people. This had made the Atbalmin afraid that if they visited the Telefolmin they might encounter Fukunkon, a paradoxically young-old, unmarried mother with immense and dangerous power.

Along with the mixed messages about Fukunkon's age and marital status, there was an ambiguity about her movements. Though Telefomin was said to have been her main home, she did not come originally from there, nor was it certain that she stayed there. The narratives that concern her were mainly set during her journeys. Yet one of the main effects of her actions along these journeys was to make places by building certain temples ***(am yawol)*** that became the heart of various human groups and their communities. According to some very "deep" narratives known only to initiated men, Fukunkon also fixed into place the very bounds of the world, so that the

ground would stay firm. In these ways, just as Fukunkon embodied different ages and marital states, she also embodied both sides of the female-centered process of movement and emplacement.

Conclusion: The Place of Differences among Women

Anthropologists have long recognized how men's relationships to women are linked to men's relationships with each other. It is now widely accepted that indigenous theories of male superiority, systems of marriage, and ritual initiations work to support and legitimate hierarchy among men. Differences among men can be said to be fundamental, in the sense that they generate continual tensions that incite and support much else. Yet relatively little has been written about how differences and contestations among women might be linked to female claims to social power. Atbalmin women, much like men, drew on differences between themselves and men to deal with' differences among themselves. Among women, as among men, the main divide was between those who were young, unmarried, and poorer versus those who are older, married, and wealthier. The idea of a female principle tied to reproduction was used to account for such differences and to legitimize them.

The Atbalmin seemed to understand differences among women in terms of social reproduction, that is, of creating and supporting others, men and women alike. Claims to women's power were built, in this way, on a seemingly disinterested basis. Rarely if ever did people acknowledge that processes of social reproduction could empower certain women. In the face of this lack of attention to differences among women, it proved helpful to look at the situation of young women in marriage. As the case of Ankon indicates, young women and old women often had different stakes in the outcome of a marriage. These stakes reflected broader differences in the situation of women who were younger versus older and married versus unmarried. Significantly, even in the context of marriage negotiations, the tensions among women were not disclosed in a straightforward, open way. Rather, very different views were expressed depending on who was speaking to whom and in what social context. Women spoke differently in the presence of men, and young and unmarried women spoke differently in the presence of older and married women. The variations were not just a reflection of tensions but a medium through which the tensions existed.

Not only were marriage negotiations a kind of social space where tensions among women were revealed, but these differences were productive of another kind of social space. I have already suggested that there were two kinds of social landscape, one linked to men and the other to women. These

provided alternative ways in which people understood their place, an indigenous example of "multilocality" and "multivocality" (Rodman 1992).

The female-centered landscape of the Atbalmin holds some broader implication for social theories of place. In general, anthropologists have tended to approach places as fixed locations or as a grid of relations between a number of such places. They have tended to focus largely on how existing places are tied together or divided. They have found the actions of men, often determined by competition and inequality, to be especially critical for these processes. By contrast, anthropologists have tended to neglect the problem of how human places came to be: the interrelated processes of creating places and persons. Not coincidentally, these processes are often linked to the actions of women in indigenous social theories.

In recent years, however, there has been a new interest in viewing the process of the production of places and space (e.g., Munn 1986; Meyers 1991; Rodman 1992; Rosaldo 1981; Weiner 1991). It is worth considering the implications the Atbalmin case may offer to these developments. I have noted that the Atbalmin saw women's choices of staying or leaving in marriage in terms of a larger process that I called "movement and emplacement." People represented and understood the nature and origins of their society in terms of this process. It seems to me that these ways of understanding among the Atbalmin reflected something basic about the way the creation of places is linked to social reproduction. Women at times explicitly pointed to their role in the creation of place in making claims to social power. It may be useful to compare Atbalmin views of women and place with those found among other societies.

A neglect of this productive aspect of place has been encouraged, arguably, by a lack of attention to the kinds of actions and views associated with women and with the differences among women. My analysis provides further evidence that there is reason to take differences among women more seriously, not merely as a reflection of other factors, but as playing a constitutive role in social life.

NOTES

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1. Ankon is not the actual name of the woman. To protect confidentiality, I use pseudonyms (typical Atbalmin names used as substitutes) for individual persons and specific communities.

2. Some have questioned my use of the term *elopement* for Ankon's second departure, given that she ran off alone and was later rejected. However, Ankon expected that Bokban wanted her to run away to him, completing something they had first attempted together.

3. The indigenous term *Nalumin* is based on the word people use for their common language, *nalum* (known to linguists as a dialect of Tifal), plus a suffix, *min,* that stands for a group. I have used the local term, Nalumin, in some previous writings.

4. Fukunkon is not the only deity in Atbalmin religion, but she is unquestionably the chief character. Atbalmin narratives about Fukunkon fall within a larger pattern of sacred narratives among the Mountain Ok centered on an "Old Woman," often called Afek.

5. While both men and women acknowledged this joint contribution, men found the subject particularly unpleasant and rarely spoke about it, never in front of women. The disjunction of male and female discourse on this subject is apparently more developed in some other Mountain Ok societies. Jorgensen has found significant differences between men's and women's accounts of conception (1983). His analysis of these alternative models was an inspiration for this essay.

6. The position of "sacred woman" exists in other Mountain Ok groups including the Telefolmin (Jorgensen 1981) and the Bimin-Kuskusmin (Poole 1981).

7. Along with the positive side of women's power, the Atbalmin recognized a negative side that was articulated in ideas of sorcery *(biis).* In a reversal of their role in providing daily food from the gardens, some women were said to use food as a way to kill others (by taking a bit of food and then treating it in a special way). Such women also were believed to kill people by invisible assault. In a reversal of motherhood, people said that one of the chief targets of women sorcerers were the newborn children of others. It is important to keep in mind that men were suspected of committing sorcery roughly as often as women.

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