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The Father's Tears

After an Etoro father has distributed the marriage pig and the many shells given him for his daughter, he weeps profusely for hours in an expression of grief. He laments having accepted the "compensation" and wishes he could recover his daughter instead—but he has transformed her status by his act. As Kelly argues, the shells, like all compensation, are given to assuage grief. Unlike equations often made elsewhere in Papua New Guinea—and he draws contrasts with Highlands societies in particular—such shell valuables are not equated with rights in persons or regarded as substitutes for people or for people's work. Rather, they are given in response to emotions that the donor draws out of the recipient.

This observation about the Etoro comes in the course of Kelly's argument

about the construction of inequality. Collier and Rosaldo's classic paper (1981) was an obvious starting point in that (despite such marriage payments) the Etoro apparently fit many of the criteria of so-called brideservice societies in which transactions at marriage do not refer to the objectification of labor in either persons or valuables but require that labor be directly expended in the service of maintaining affinal relations. Where valuables do embody labor, as in so-called bridewealth societies, their accumulation sets up a very different social dynamic. In the former the groom is largely responsible for such transactions, while in the latter he tends to be dependent on his elders. Dependency has long been one of the factors that anthropologists have taken as a diagnostic for the level of egalitarianism they discern in such societies. Marriage is at the heart of this model: inequality between men and women is Collier and Rosaldo's primary concern, and they argue that the egalitarianism of societies such as Etoro holds only if one excludes marriage from view. The groom has more to gain than the bride, and it is the bride who loses her independence.

Kelly organizes his book as an extended critique of Collier and Rosaldo's position. Several of these propositions are upturned, above all that marriage is not central to the dynamic of sexual inequality and that it is not a gain/constraint for women and men alike. Other of the propositions remain, as we shall see. In the meanwhile, the significance of polemic cannot be overestimated—Collier and Rosaldo's argument animates the substance of this book. If I praise the creativity of Kelly's account, that includes the parent account: I come away with renewed appreciation of the brilliance of their argument at the time, and dazzled by the brilliance of Kelly's rebuttal. The latter has all the meticulousness of conception and attention to factual detail one has come to expect from Kelly; this book fuels a sense of the worth of the anthropological project.

The 750 Etoro (the size of a couple of Highlands clans) are clearly a people to work with. Kelly's book is extensive, its main messages restated in several different ways, its observations rich, and above all its statistics highly informative. My notes cover many pages, and it will be a long time before I have finished with it. Here I raise one small set of issues that seem to me of general interest.

The Father's Tears

The nub of Kelly's argument is an interpretation of the nature of transactions between men and women. He contributes to a debate that continues to reverberate across the Pacific, these days in the context of goods and money that the Etoro had hardly seen when Kelly made his first study—how

inequalities between men and women are tied into larger structures of inequality in society. It is often taken for granted that one basis of these inequalities must be access to the material products of labor, so it is important that ethnographers should remind us of other possibilities. If (as Kelly argues) Etoro inequality is built on a hierarchy of virtue, material equity cannot be a precondition for equality.

One could dismiss "virtue," as others have argued for "reciprocity," as an ideology that conceals the exploitation of labor. But the empirical evidence offered in this account prevents such an easy turn. One would be concealing too many important observations about the quality of social relations and the nature of body and spirit in Etoro thinking, as well as the substitutability of persons for one another. There is now a substantial collection of anthropological material from the Pacific on the contrast between societies where wealth items are (as in the Papua New Guinea Highlands cases I am most familiar with) and are not (as in Etoro, among others) presented as substitutes for person. What Kelly's work does is make strange, raise questions about, related constructs that have to do with growth and substance. These have not received the comparative attention they are due.

Why does the father weep and what are these tears? He weeps after receiving the marriage gifts, not before. While the compensation may have been to assuage his bad feelings at the prospect of his daughter's marriage, the sequence as such nonetheless reverses that in the *kosa* ceremony, which also takes place between affines (including on the occasion of a marriage). Here senior men weep in grief at memories elicited by a dancing display, and compensation follows. In this second context, we may note, older men avoid being recipients and it is the younger generation who demand the shells. Both payments are compensation *(su),* but the one takes place before and the other after weeping. Kelly specifically tells us that the bride's father is weeping in bereavement, because he cannot undo his action in receiving the shells. And on this occasion he cannot avoid being a recipient. Why should being a recipient cause anguish to an older man?

Here we can turn to the larger context of male responsibility that Kelly describes so vividly. At the heart of the prestige system is a moral hierarchy based on the generosity with which senior men deplete their bodies in order to engender the growth of the next generation. This includes the provision of game, the insemination of juniors and wives, the circulation of shell valuables. Men are life-givers. This is a male capacity that is also a virtue, and it is a virtue that transforms itself into certain prestige-giving acts simply not available to women. Male products (meat gained by hunting, semen, shells) have a prestige-producing potential female products lack. He argues that it is the underlying moral evaluation that is at the root of inequality between the sexes.

Younger men are those most anxious to assert to their generosity—both in the active dissemination of shell valuables and in the active insemination of wives and brothers-in-law. Shell valuables are equated with semen. Young men thus keep semen in circulation, directly and indirectly, to a much greater extent than older, middle-aged men who have already depleted themselves. Now, whereas the shells are tied into the growth of younger men—and they try to get rid of them as fast as possible in order to turn themselves from recipients into givers of life force—the shells become almost inactive in older men's hands. Kelly's statistics show that the ways older men have of getting rid of them seem reduced. The father, we might say, is an older man having to face in the opposite direction; from his being a lifelong bestower he is now identified as a recipient. And whereas up till now he has been maturing both son and daughter as recipients of his own life force (a child possesses life force as a consequence of the father's loss of it), both are taken away from him. The daughter's husband will inseminate a designated younger brother as well as her. The father instead receives the shells, a signal of what he has already expended. Perhaps the copious tears reiterate that expenditure, body fluid cascading from his orifices.

To weep after the receipt, then, suggests that the gift is in retrospect for what has been previously expended. If so, it seems possible to accumulate generosity, that is, to be seen to have been generous, which is the state of prestige to which men in their prime aspire. (*Tafilido*s, men of prestige, are inseminating many wives, contributing game to the community and shells to others.) Yet to be only a recipient is to be locked out of what is most worthy according to the moral system.

As Kelly reiterates, women—unable to disseminate (or inseminate)—are permanently locked out. They cannot display the "virtue of generosity." Instead, they are prone to displaying the "vice of accumulation." Or rather, even on those small occasions when they could give away what they accumulate, they often elect not to do so. Indeed, although there are public occasions at which both men and women receive valuables, Kelly points out the transactions are not the "same," for the valuables have different connotations for the two sexes. Women are in any case apt to transform them into body ornaments.

The Mother's Ornaments

Why, when women take valuables, do they wear them as ornaments? I wonder if this is not a stronger statement than Kelly makes of it (he uses it as an example of women's having valuables they do not use). I would doubt very much if Etoro men would want shells from a woman: they want first the receptacle and then the reduplicated receptacle in the child whom they

grow. If the woman offers a vehicle for the man's semen, as the child grows it in turn becomes a vehicle for the father's life-giving powers. Yet the child should not grow too well: the fat are witches. The body is no measure therefore of this kind of generosity, because it cannot be accumulated in the body—it can only show in the corresponding vitality of the young. So, too, the shells a man receives are nothing without receptacles (recipients) to receive them.

Men put themselves into the position of having to disseminate all the time—their theories of vitality, the nervous motility of shells, means that they *cannot* turn valuables into ornaments that stay on their skins. So in a sense the weight and dimension and solidity of bodies cannot serve as a metaphorical resource for male virtue. The ideal male body becomes a register of the state of the life force *(hame).*

In this connection we should consider Kelly's observation that there is no theory of female substance transmission. Like the female-produced starch that only sates hunger, and unlike men's game that causes growth, women produce children unable to grow without men's input. Men "complete" the work of women's childbirth by bringing girls and boys to maturity, through bestowing vital energy *(hame).* We might then ask if there is really a theory of male *substance* transmission—that is, is Etoro semen usefully regarded as a substance? The ornament on the woman's body perhaps invites us to ask what it is that women's bodies, by contrast, contain.

I have never forgotten the service that Collier and Rosaldo did in dislodging the figure of "the mother" from its Euro-American stereotype as universal life-giver. They wrote that "neither men nor women in very simple societies celebrate women as nurturers or women's unique capacity to give life" (1981:276). While they put this down to conjugal dynamics and intergenerational (in)dependence, that figure also holds a key to a wider comparative enterprise. Kelly notes that Collier and Rosaldo were right about the significance of the fact that women are not regarded as life-givers—Etoro men take on that role. However, instead of lingering on the strange figure of the mother, his focus is on understanding the moral hierarchy created by men's efforts (men, signally, do not need women to be generous).[1] Having decided that this hierarchy is a model of Etoro society seen largely from the perspective of the initiated younger men/spirit mediums, he observes that there is no female countermodel and more or less leaves it at that.

The men are modeling a procreative process. Not just about social reproduction, theirs is a model about the building up and depletion of bodies and the creation of persons. I think there is a more interesting set of issues behind the rather dismal-sounding conclusion that Kelly comes to, namely, that women give birth to death, lifeless flesh whose animation comes from men.

Collier and Rosaldo pointed to the expenditure of body energy in "bride-service" societies by contrast with systems where valuables represent the accumulation of labor. That requires a prior analogy (on the part of the actors) between body and output. One medium developed elsewhere in Papua New Guinea is an analogy between the substance of the human body and the substance of the valuables/objects. That is what we find in so-called bridewealth societies: a quite different corporal dynamic. In some, growing large is a sign of wealth and of growth, while in others (through consumption and abstention) ideal states alternate between fatness and thinness. Food production becomes available as a metaphor for maturation, and in that situation the products of work assume different dimensions. Indeed, perhaps *food* then becomes conceptualized as nurturant. Or rather, what goes into producing food as a maturation agent—that is, work—is conceptualized as a value in its own right. The parent's work thus becomes a social problematic, evinced (for instance) in lifetime payments to mother's or father's kin; despite affinal exchanges and initiates' payments to their mother's brother, maternally directed child payments are virtually absent in Etoro. Indeed, there seems no separate relational focus for female parenting that is not derived from male parenting. Kelly's provocative countercase holds much information about how one might reanalyze "bridewealth" regimes.

Labor and Life

The concept of "labor" occupies an interesting place in Kelly's book. As an economic category relating to the organization of work and the control that persons exercise over their activities, Kelly shows that its disposition cannot account for the inequalities evident in Etoro society. On the contrary, he reiterates over and again that the basis for inequality lies in the moral hierarchy of virtue. What is this moral hierarchy based on? It is based, as we have seen, on a notion of vitality, translated as life force *(hame),* which is the cause of bodily growth and energy, and which men transmit to others. Those who attain high evaluations are those who show their generosity through giving away such force. Men in their prime are both the recipients and donors of life force.

Morality displaces labor as the organizing force of this understanding of the Etoro. I see this as part of a much wider move in recent anthropological writings to dislodge morality from social relations. That might sound odd when Kelly's whole account is to show how it is the moral hierarchy that determines social differentiation. But I mean to point to the autonomous role that Kelly's apprehension of Etoro concepts would give to the value of virtue, epitomized at one point in his arguing that we must take semen transactions sui generis. Although semen may be likened to shells, he argues, we

cannot do an economic computation of the exchanges as though one were dealing with the exchange of material items. On the contrary, exchange also fails to fit the case Kelly wants to make. In particular, neither exchange nor labor will do as the pivots from which to think about relations between the sexes. Careful economic analysis of transactions between spouses, for instance, makes it readily apparent that it is not from the transactions themselves that inequalities between men and women arise. This means that any model based on the calculation of control over products of labor will lead to erroneous conclusions. One such model is precisely that based on the difference between brideservice and bridewealth societies, which considered the respective benefits and obligations that arise from conjugal interdependence. Kelly even goes so far as to challenge the concept of obligation as prior to inequality. At least in the Etoro case, he argues, it is not a preexisting structure of obligations that relativizes the contributions of men and women, but the prior determination of the relative value or worth of their activities. That in turn leads to an evaluation of moral worth based on the capacity for generosity.

One effect of Kelly's economic analyses (and he subjects several domains of activity to scrutiny) is that "labor" becomes leached of those very moral qualities that it held in those anthropological writings of the 1970s and 1980s that looked to property relations as the source of sexual inequality. He can find plenty of accounts of economic life that argue along the same variables as he does. But the context twenty years ago was different. As the outer edge of a vortex of interests created by Marxist anthropology, and in many cases as the inner edge of feminist reevaluations of women's work, the abstract concept of "labor" carried significant overtones. I do not think it would have otherwise held quite the analytical power it seemed to offer for the uncovering of total systems.

These overtones included the notion that labor is to be regarded as the expenditure of body effort, a disposition of energies in which a person finds his or her self-expression. The appropriation of labor thus had a particular purchase on the anthropologist's analysis: persons seem to be prevented from enjoying what would otherwise be theirs. In other words, there was an implicit morality to the concept of labor—tied into a sense of self-worth, to the realization of oneself through work, and to the implicit desirability of using work to ends that enhanced the worker. The products of labor were the social token and embodiments of that use of energy. Kelly, so to speak, extrudes morality from labor, rejects the inadequacy of an economic model, and finds Etoro morality embedded instead in a hierarchy based on virtue. This virtue is nothing other than the ability to deploy the effects of one's own energy. Energy is concretized in the notion of life force, its production, distribution, and consumption among persons. In the Etoro case, using this life

force to one's own ends means, for men, being able to give it away in order to attain what Kelly insists is the basis of the moral superiority that comes with generosity. One cannot compute material gains and losses: elevated persons are owed nothing but the acknowledgement of their moral standing.

What is curious is that despite this most persuasive ethnographic vision, the result does not give an unfamiliar picture. It is as though Etoro *hame* were doing in this analysis much of the systemic work that concepts of work and exchange have accomplished in other contexts. We still have men with a dual orientation, towards specific women and towards other men in general, whereas women seem more closely locked into relations with specific men. Social life still seems an alternation between states (cross-sex and same-sex sociality). Men still need wives in one sense, as they do juniors and youths, even though it is as receptacles for their life force rather than for contributions of food and work. They even reinvent in the anthropologist's mind something like the old division between brideservice and bridewealth regimes, even if the focus on marriage and wealth is proved misplaced. An intriguing question, then, is how much of a model has to disappear before it really is laid to rest.

There is a larger question being posed here. How men rather than women came to endow "life" is amply answered by Kelly. What remains to be asked is how, in other Pacific systems not based on such a moral hierarchy of virtue, "life" ever became associated with food/childbirth and parenthood, maternal or paternal, as nurture. The concepts of nurture and growth remain to be explored. For Collier and Rosaldo (1981:275–276), the issue is more than one of food supplies: the mother as nurturer, for instance, is a moral figure in the sense that worth, if not virtue, inheres in the productive and creative efforts that bring others to maturity and keep them in health. Under what circumstances does nurture emerge as a value on its own?

"Life" is a value on its own for some. Kelly's rendering of the Etoro holds great interest for the cultural apprehension of the "life" as in "life-forms." Life-forms have become a Euro-American object of thought in a late twentieth-century context where new genetic and reproductive strategies create new beings, such that the abstract concept of life itself acquires a moral tenor that makes such creations daring. The issue is the appropriate (correct, ethical, worthy) relationship of life to human (pro)creativity. Etoro men have built a whole system of social differentiations based on the access to the ability to transmit life. I wonder if they would recognize the new morality of intellectual property rights, which attribute creativity to those who bring a product to completion through their interventions. But in the Etoro case this is never in perpetuity: Etoro expenditure is directed onto other human beings who act, crucially, as recipients, but whose own subsequent expenditures perpetuate not the donor's original life but their own.

NOTE

1. At various junctures Kelly carefully distinguishes women's from men's viewpoints. Thus his argument about marriage transactions is that men in effect take a same-sex view and women, with their exchange of male and female food products, take a cross-sex view. However, he only rarely uses these terms. By and large in Kelly's account gender is present only when a difference between male and female is relevant. So when men and women do the same things, gender cannot be a variable—hence the denial that gender forms a structuring basis of productive relations! He is quite explicit about the complementarity of husbands and wives (and later, in discussing marriage transactions, he points to the commingled piles of sweet potato and taro in this light). But he implies that only when the activities of men and women are distinct, even "opposed," does gender operate as a principle of organization. Thus he delineates the salient gender configurations between homosexuality and heterosexuality principally in the sense of "sexuality."

REFERENCE

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