

## FACTORS RELATING TO INFREQUENT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AMONG THE NAGOVISI

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Physical violence between spouses is infrequent among the Nagovisi of North Solomons Province (Bougainville), Papua New Guinea. A primarily ethnographic account of these matrilineal swidden farmers is offered in discussing this situation. I also will make cross-cultural comparisons when possible,

Although figures for a statistical survey are lacking, I can provide estimates of the frequency of various kinds of disputes, especially violent ones. Domestic violence was not a subject in which I had much interest during my fieldwork (due perhaps in part to its infrequent occurrence); I was much concerned, however, with kinship, family life, and conflict resolution. My sample consisted of several villages whose total population was about two hundred. I heard news about an additional three hundred or so people, whom I did not see regularly, but most of whom I personally recognized and whose genealogies I knew. During the two and a half years during which I lived in Pomalate village,<sup>1</sup> I recorded the occurrence of three episodes in which a husband assaulted his wife and one from a village nearby, to make a total of four.<sup>2</sup>

My impression is that incidents of physical assault between spouses are rare. I never witnessed violence between a husband and wife. I did see physical struggles between brother and sister, between female relatives, and between men. I also heard children crying as a result of being hit by a parent (but did not see the blows struck) or in the course of a

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tantrum that was part of the provocation for the parent to strike out. I also saw a number of arguments that involved shouting or verbal insult. Additionally, informants told me news of the day including any violent arguments in other villages. I also heard accounts of violent arguments that had taken place long ago. I no doubt missed hearing of some fights, but Nagovisi take a great interest in conflict and, since most of it leads to court resolution, it is widely discussed. It is unlikely that any occurrence of domestic violence would remain a secret (cf. Nero's article in this volume about Palau, where domestic violence is a family secret),

### **Form and Causes of Arguments between Husband and Wife**

Since arguments do not usually involve personal physical violence, they more often take the form of verbal insult and property destruction.

#### *Verbal Insult*

Insulting another verbally seems to be a primary way of disputing. A serious insult leads to litigation. Usually a fine will be paid, just as for a physical injury. Although the amounts asked for insult are less than for injury, in a sense the two are considered, if not equivalent, at least in the same legal category. Women can compete very well with men in verbal sparring as they cannot in physical conflict; in fact, I have argued that talk (in general) is the source of women's efficacy (Nash 1987). In the past, insults might lead the offended party to retaliate with deadly force. Today this is not the case.

The following are two examples of the sort of insult that may pass between husband and wife. Louis gave tobacco to fellow villagers Joseph and Lucy.<sup>3</sup> When his wife, Claire, found out about it, she told Louis to go fuck the people he gave their tobacco to. He became upset; he cried, and went to the house next door. Claire paid him A\$6 for the insult. In another case, Bernadette asked her husband, Francis, to clean up their toddler daughter's feces, He said he didn't have a shovel. She then said he should shovel it with his tongue. He got mad and went home to his sister. The sister demanded payment (which she received) for this insult, Bernadette was "dancing with anger" when she said this. Her husband was very lazy and many people felt that his behavior helped to cause the argument. Nevertheless, Bernadette was wrung to say such an insulting thing; consequently, it was appropriate for Francis's sister to ask for a fine.

*Property Destruction*

Informants claimed that both men and women might destroy property during arguments. My observations seemed to show this to be a particularly female expression of anger. The Nagovisi say that women destroy property because they cannot trounce their husbands and that husbands destroy property because they do not want to kill their wives.

Agnes chopped up her husband Simon's bag while we all watched. At the same time, she recited her grievances in a tense and angry voice. Because Simon had declared himself "married" to his newly widowed sister-in-law, Agnes claimed that Simon had only pretended to show sorrow for his brother and had been lusting after the dead man's wife for a long time. No one intervened.

People told me that Martha had destroyed a radio with an axe. The precipitating factor had been hearing a song on Radio Bougainville that her husband had composed; she construed the lyrics (which contained the line, "I've thrown all your letters away") as denying the fact that he routinely had sexual relations with her.

Anselm chopped up a strand of shell money one morning after discovering that his children had broken his walking stick. People felt, however, that this act needed interpretation: he was not really angry about the walking stick or at his children but instead at members of his clan for not having visited him during a recent sickness.

*Causes*

I have stated elsewhere that the triggering causes of arguments between Nagovisi spouses often seem to be trivial. Such causes include "surprise at the wife's having bought a new saucepan, the alleged withholding of tobacco from the husband, or nagging by the wife that her sick husband seek medical aid" (Nash 1974:65). Although male informants stated that "laziness" might be a reason for a man to hit his wife, in fact, failure to fulfill domestic duties did not appear to cause actual arguments I heard about. Some women who were a bit lazy were never hit or yelled at, and one who was not at all lazy was hit once by her husband, allegedly for not fixing his food quickly. In some cases, the discovery of a spouse's adultery may cause an argument; in other cases, it goes unacknowledged by husband and wife, even when it results in the conception of a child.<sup>4</sup> I don't recall arguments between husband and wife concerning bride-wealth amounts or pig prices (such disputes would

involve more than a married couple), or such matters as whether cocoa should be planted or not.

My field notes show that certain couples seem to go through difficult periods of nearly continual disagreement in which one or the other may resort to violence. Also, some individuals seem more ready to argue or to hit in argument. These people were fairly young, relatively recently married, and not accustomed to living with each other. One middle-aged man appeared to be having what I hesitantly call a mid-life crisis. Thus, the biographies of individuals and the circumstances of a marriage seem to have more explanatory value for disputes, especially violent ones, than do more proximate causes; this observation fits with the lack in Nagovisi of cultural patterns that use violence in arguments.

### **Cultural Factors Regarding the Consequences of Domestic Arguments and Their Resolution**

The consequence of an argument between husband and wife may involve any or all of the following: physical separation or withdrawal from part of domestic life, court hearing, assessment and payment of fine, and reconciliation. Background information on cultural and social practices makes these alternatives intelligible.

The Nagovisi are matrilineal and uxori-local. They are organized into moieties, clans, and named and unnamed lineages. They have become increasingly uxori-local since the introduction of cocoa as a cash crop in the 1960s. Before that time, uxori-locality was the ideal but other forms of residence were tolerated and practiced more frequently than they are today. My survey in 1969/1970 showed 81 percent of all couples residing uxori-locally.

Villages are based, thus, on a core of matrilineally related women, usually comprising the female members of one or several named or unnamed lineages. Their imported husbands (and fathers) also are residents, as are unmarried males of the matrilineage. Households generally consist of the nuclear family, although it is not inappropriate for unattached relatives (but not the wife's mother) to be included.

Due to the fact of uxori-local residence, a man leaves his natal village at marriage to move into the village of a wife. Because most (71 percent) marriages are between people whose natal villages are less than two miles apart, men find it convenient to visit the homes of their sisters and parents. It is here that a man will return in the event of serious marital discord. In the event of serious disagreement between husband and

wife, either may act. Sometimes a wife will put her husband's belongings outside as a sign that he is to move back to his natal village. More often a husband will leave of his own accord.<sup>5</sup>

Once the husband has left, negotiation begins, the result of which is usually that the wife's kin will pay valuables to the husband's kin. Then the husband returns. Husbands can count on pretty much unqualified support and sympathy from their matrilineal kin. This is possible because most arguments between husband and wife are not clear-cut cases of wrongdoing on the part of one individual only but situations in which shortcomings of both spouses have figured. Another factor making for the partisanship of the husband's kin concerns the balances that should be maintained between affines (see below, p. 137).

Although uxorilocal residence may provide a solidarity group for women that protects them from spousal violence, it offers an important advantage for men, too. Men can take an escalating action that is not violent by moving to their natal villages. This is not seen as a defeat for men but instead shames wives. It dramatizes the intolerable state that a husband faces during this time of conflict.

Men may stay with their wives but cease to eat their wives' food if there is an argument. Usually one food item (for example, coconut) will be avoided until a fine has been paid to settle the dispute. The wife continues to cook her husband's food but is inconvenienced and reminded daily of the unresolved problem.

A favored method of resolution for nearly any kind of argument is to go to court. Wrongs can be righted through a system of fines, today paid in a combination of cash and shell valuables. Three kinds of wrongs always require such compensation: insult, injury--especially drawing blood, and death. Married couples do not give up their right to sue one another. In fact, the fines paid as a result of arguments are part of the continual adjustments--the evaluation of credits and debits--between husband and wife that go on during the course of a marriage. These adjustments end with the payment (or decision that payment is not required) of death dues after the demise of one of the partners (see Nash 1974 for a longer discussion of these phenomena).

### **Other Kinds of Violence**

Levinson has recently argued that "wife-beating is part of a broader cultural pattern of violent relationships between persons who reside in the same community" (1989:45). I will consider now sexual violence toward women (rape and sexual assault), physical violence toward chil-

dren, and physical violence between women, between men, and between brother and sister. Among the Nagovisi such violence is also minimal.

### *Rape*

In the course of filling out a questionnaire for the Law Reform Commission of Papua New Guinea in 1971, I made inquiries about rape. After much reflection, people recalled a single incident that had taken place ten miles away in the late 1940s: the rapist had been angry with a male relative of the victim. By and large, people could not quite imagine how rape would work; they said that the woman would cry out and people would come to her aid. Nagovisi women do not "change their minds" about mutually agreeable fornication to later allege rape.

To force a woman to copulate is not considered admirable in any sense. Rather, it meets disapproval or, more likely, is considered ridiculous given the probable consequences. A fieldwork incident may illustrate: a young married woman from the study area was traveling alone to visit relatives in a village about ten miles away. A teenage male from that village surprised her on the deserted track, indicating his intention to have sex relations with her. The woman slashed the man's shirt with her garden knife, thus repelling him, and proceeded unmolested on her way. This story was retold by men and women in my village with much amusement at the expense of the young man.

### *Treatment of Children*

In Nagovisi, children under the age of five are not usually subject to corporal punishment. With one exception of redirected aggression, in which an unbalanced widow hit her eighteen-month-old son when her boyfriend told her he wouldn't marry her,<sup>6</sup> any hitting or slapping was directed at older children. This may be for doing something dangerous (for example, picking through the anthropologist's rubbish pit) as well as for disobedience. A struggle I witnessed between a teenage girl and her mother seems different because the daughter was the same size as her mother. In this incident, slaps were exchanged when the girl delayed coming home from church by four hours and did not bring the bread she was supposed to have purchased. The mother's brother came to the assistance of his sister, pulled his niece away, and denounced her.

When older children (ages six to twelve) have tantrums or fight with younger siblings, parents may strike them with their hands or nudge

them with feet if the child is lying on the ground. I saw or heard the screaming of an angry child once or twice.

Some kinds of physical aggression by very young children are ignored. For example, adults pay little attention to a toddler who beats them with a branch. The adult might move out of the way or duck while talking to someone else, but the child is not told to stop.

Children do not usually hit one another in play, even though they use knives and sticks as toys, Nor do I recall chasing and threats to hurt. Teasing and insults may cause damage to feelings, however: for example, one five-year-old boy burst into tears and went home after an older boy mentioned to the general amusement of a group of children that the five-year-old had had an erection on a previous occasion. The pattern of going home after an insult starts early.

Parents complain about their children's behavior: frequently heard are allegations that children are lazy and disobedient. For discipline, parents may lecture them on their shortcomings. In Nagovisi, younger children are frightened with warnings about ghosts, snakes, or white people to insure obedience. Informants said that one villager, a former policeman, had punished his son for truancy by the Papua New Guinea police punishment of *kalabus long san*, that is, being tied up in the sun. The child was probably between seven and nine when this happened, since he quit school after Form II. This is not an indigenous Nagovisi punishment and all who spoke of this were disapproving.

Parents in Nagovisi are condemned (by gossip) for being bad parents when their children "do not grow," that is, are short or thin (or perhaps merely unprepossessing in some way--for example, are subject to insect bites, have especially bad runny noses, or perhaps are just shy). Stunting a child's growth may be done by withholding the appropriate ceremonies in his or her honor, especially those for firstborns, or by not feeding enough. Although this does not quite fit Western notions of abuse because of the magical concepts involved, it might come closest to a Nagovisi idea of serious and socially disapproved neglect of children. One young widow with four children ranging in age from one to twelve appeared to be having trouble feeding her offspring. People would castigate her from time to time and suggest that she ought to remarry. Her very competent mother quite frequently fed and housed the two oldest children.

I should mention that Nagovisi seemed proud of "good" children, even when the children were not their own. People commented favorably upon children who were sturdy, straightforward in their manner, and mature for their age.

*Fights between Women*

Women sometimes had arguments with each other that involved name-calling. Women could also challenge other women to a competitive showing of shell valuables--which contained the potential for serious arguments. As mentioned above, mother and teenage daughter might fight physically. But most conflicts among women seemed to involve those of different named or unnamed lineages (*wetetenamo*, "one grandmother"; see Nash 1974).

I saw a fight between two women who are classificatory parallel cousins: Cecilia stabbed Helena in the head with a comb. The cause had to do with the alleged theft of the comb by Helena's children. Helena had also teased Cecilia, saying she didn't have Cecilia's comb but only an old, broken one. Helena's wound bled briskly for a while and there was much screaming and dramatic gesturing. This resulted in a long court hearing in which Cecilia was denounced. The first fine asked was large and Cecilia's mother refused to pay, Cecilia herself having no money. Finally they settled on a smaller amount.

*Fights between Men*

The fights I saw between men were often intergenerational shouting matches, sometimes aggravated by alcohol. Men were sometimes denounced by other men in angry voices but did not themselves get angry back. The causes were varied. Young men at odds with their fathers might tell them to "get out of our village and go back to your own [natal] place." In one instance a young man spit at his older sister's husband, but physical attacks were more typical of fighting by those under the influence of alcohol (see below). Young men in such a condition might attempt to assault their classificatory fathers, but their attempts were fairly ineffectual.

*A Struggle between Brother and Sister*

Brothers and sisters are not supposed to fight. They are responsible for one another's good behavior, however. Avoidance etiquette and uxori-local residence make the expression of strong emotion between brothers and sisters infrequent. Nevertheless, I witnessed one incident, in which a widow and her uterine half-brother struggled publicly. The brother slapped her several times. She had been screaming in support of her lover and chopping holes in her house with a machete. An unrelated man also helped restrain this woman. Afterward, people said the



brother had acted as he had because he was “embarrassed” by his sister’s behavior. It was said to have been the right thing to do and no one suggested that he pay any fine to her or she to him. It is important to stress that the struggle did not stem from a disagreement between the two.

### *Violence in the Past: Head-hunting and Initiation*

Like other Solomon Islanders, the Nagovisi took trophy heads in the past during feuding. This practice ended around 1925 or so with Australian pacification. Old people still remembered the days of tribal fighting; their memories were unromantic.

According to informants, the taking of heads might be facilitated by the ingestion of a certain kind of magical powder called *piko*, which was made out of human bone (and other things) at cremations. The effect of *piko* was to turn a man into an angry killer with red eyes and great strength, a *pikonara*. A child who showed unusual belligerence was considered likely to grow up as a *pikonara*. Although valued in former times, this type of person has disappeared today, according to informants.

An old man in the next village was represented to me as having been a *pikonara* in his youth. Many stories of his truculence as an adolescent, his many stormy marriages, and his bravery and treachery in World War II were told. In his old age, there was no indication of anything pathological in his personality. On the contrary, he was one of the most intelligent and insightful people in the community. He managed his polygynous household peacefully. The Nagovisi explanation was that he had gotten old and was no longer a fighter.

There was no tradition of painful ordeals in adolescent initiation. A small, feast might be held for young men after their first killing (or in preparation for it--informants were not clear on this subject), but this was optional. Piercing of the nasal septum was remembered by one informant as very painful: when I asked him whether he had cried, he said, “Did I ever!” No ritual significance was attached to this act; it was optional and evidently cosmetic. Girls’ initiation, properly done for the firstborn daughter on the occasion of her first menstruation, involved no painful acts.

### *Suicide*

Suicide took place in the past and occurs today, sometimes in connection with unhappiness over the opposite sex. Protest suicide by young women in the past was directed not at cruel husbands but at parents for

forcing a marriage (cf. Counts 1980). This is why parents today, according to informants, do not seek to press unpopular candidates on their daughters. This kind of suicide was confined to the newlywed bride.

All recent local suicides and attempts I heard of were by men. Men might attempt suicide in reaction to adultery by their wives. Some people seem to have overreacted: one man killed himself from shame after having been discovered in adultery. Another man killed himself because he believed (erroneously) that he had killed his child. Sometimes the reasons were obscure and no motive for suicide could be offered, other than what amounts to hereditary insanity (that is, "his uncle was crazy, too" and such).

#### *The Effect of Alcohol on Violence*

It is not possible for me to state what part alcohol might play today (1989) in arguments. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, only men drank and most alcohol was consumed at *pati*, all-night festivities with food and music. At that time, people thought drinking makes a person lose his strength and, therefore, fights after drinking were considered pointless or comic (cf. Nero's article in this volume, in which the ability to consume large amounts of alcohol is seen as strength). A sober woman could always evade a drunken man. Women stood together when a drunk was performing. Wives might shout ridicule at drunken husbands for acting foolishly (urinating in public, falling in the mud, dancing wildly, losing clothing, and so forth). Men did not appear to get angry at this. The only fighting was between men who were drunk; it was fairly ineffectual, except when bottles were used as weapons. Young men sometimes got angry at their fathers or other older men when drunk. Men did not seem generally angry at women or use drunkenness for an excuse to act on this anger.

One instance of domestic assault, however, took place when the husband was intoxicated. The next morning, when he was sober, he joked about the whole incident--including his own behavior (see note 2).

#### **Comparison and Discussion**

The Nagovisi differ from many other societies in that physical violence between married people is neither common nor tacitly condoned. Social behavior in the United States presents a marked contrast. According to Straus (1978), in America a marriage license is a hitting license. Violence between persons who are not related is readily litigable, whereas

many barriers stand in the way of a battered spouse who seeks legal redress, although the situation is slowly changing (Micklowsky 1988). The contrast here is that Nagovisi have legal redress in cases of domestic violence, while Americans often do not.

Mushanga, in an article on wife-bashing in East African societies, says that "women ask for it" (1977-1978). "Asking for it" consists of ridiculing men and talking back--thus causing the violence to escalate, sometimes to the point of murder. No one believes that women or men wish to be hit in Nagovisi. I do not recall anyone blaming the victim for having provoked violence.

Also, as others elsewhere in this volume have noted, fights in public or in houses with leaf walls draw the attention and intervention of others. People come to the aid of quarreling couples: they feel that they should interfere. In town, isolation makes it easier to act on violent impulses and to carry them out without interference from concerned relatives or neighbors (cf. Erchak 1984). I knew only one Nagovisi married couple living outside the home area; both were schoolteachers in Rigo, southeast of Port Moresby, and neither was violent. I heard secondhand of the suicide of a young Nagovisi woman married to a Siwai policeman domiciled in Port Moresby. The woman's uncle had complained to me about her irrational and emotional behavior years before this happened.

Two topics to which I have referred above--the influence of matriliney and its concomitants, and the subject of anger--require further discussion. I have described how matriliney-related social features of the Nagovisi, including uxorilocality, have made it possible for men to physically separate themselves from their wives and thus reduce the possibility of assault. Friedl (1975) has reviewed a whole list of reasons why relationships between husbands and wives are not as tense in matrilineal societies as they are in patrilineal ones: ultimately, many of these refer to the fact that the wife is not on trial in a matrilineal society, as she is in a patrilineal one. Nor does the husband in matrilineal societies assume the unenviable position of being a disloyal outsider. Rather, emotions are not so focused on the marriage tie but diffused among numerous relatives. Melanesian matriliney, further, has been profitably analyzed recently as involving a lifelong series of exchanges between affines in which balance is highly valued (Strathern 1984; Weiner 1976; Gregory 1982). In Nagovisi the idea of reciprocity of actions and material items strongly permeates social behavior (Nash 1987). There is an awareness, from childhood on, that both positive and negative behavior must be repaid.

Although anthropologists are now attempting studies of emotion (Rosaldo 1980; Lutz 1988), the understanding of anger still presents many difficulties. The Nagovisi considered anger to be motivating and energizing; it made possible men's great actions of warfare in pre-European times (Nash 1987). Anger in pre-European times was magically enhanced and the *pikonara* was recognized and valued, if also feared. In domestic relations as I observed them, however, anger was not much in evidence. Crying children were usually labeled "angry" rather than "sad" or "in pain," the crying in grief being considered a more adult behavior. I saw a series of steps in the expression of anger, where insult and property destruction (and, for men, withdrawal to the natal village) were enacted first as signs of anger. Social factors do not favor hitting, and thus it is in a breakdown or loss of control that the occasional instances of domestic violence take place.

The Nagovisi seem to take pride in their ability to control the expression of emotion. For example, one informant counseled the importance of keeping one's self-control in court: "You can't win if you are angry." People are concerned about having their outbursts mocked as a form of gossipy entertainment, as one woman's cries in labor were, to take another example. Women should be stoic, and the young woman's anguished descriptions of her pain during childbirth were repeated for weeks by her peers in amusement (see also Nash 1987). People often respond angrily not at the time of an offense but after thinking about it for a while. Thus, angry displays may be rather controlled, like Agnes's performance when she chopped up her husband's bag, described above.

In summary, domestic violence is rare among the Nagovisi. I would argue that the incidence of domestic violence cannot be zero, however, because some couples will go through difficult times during the course of a marriage and some individuals, by virtue of temperament, are simply provocative and more given to physical violence than others.

## NOTES

Versions of this article were presented at the meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago (1987) and at meetings of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania in Savannah (1988) and San Antonio (1989). I benefited from the presentations of other members of these sessions and especially from the comments of Dorothy Counts.

1. I was resident in Nagovisi for this time period intermittently between 1969 and 1973. Support was provided by the National Institute of Mental Health and the Australian National University.

2. The following are narratives of the four cases that involved spousal violence. All names are pseudonyms.

Simon gave Agnes a black eye because she nagged him to go to the aid post and get medicine for his illness. He paid her a fine. This couple, ages fifty-two and forty-five respectively, had had marital troubles for many months. They surfaced when Simon said he wanted to marry his dead brother's very attractive widow even before the funeral took place. Over the next year or so other problems developed—he said he wanted to quit his job as an aid-post orderly, leave Agnes, live polygynously, and so on. People were saying that he had gone crazy. Many court hearings were held and many arguments took place.

Bernard knocked Dorothy to the ground because she did not fix his rice fast enough. She was fixing some greens at the time. The couple had had a "shotgun" marriage at the instigation of the mission priest when Dorothy had become pregnant. Immediately after the church ceremony, Bernard had left to work on another part of the island. He returned briefly when his daughter was two years old, but stayed with his own mother. When his daughter was four and a half, he came back to stay and set up a household. At first the couple's relationship was stormy, with many disagreements and changes of residence. Gradually their relationship improved.

Louis hit Claire when he was drunk. Her father became angry and denounced Louis, who began demanding fines for what he said were his father-in-law's "insults." The next day, when he was sober, he laughed it off. No fines were paid. Louis was seventeen and his wife nineteen. They were newly married and still living in her parents' house. Claire was the dominant spouse, having inveigled Louis into marriage when his older brother, her first choice, did not respond to her proposals that they marry. Claire, although a sweet-faced and smiling woman, was well known for her sharp and obscene insults. Louis was aimless, too young to be married (incidentally, Claire and Dorothy are sisters).

I heard about this case from informants. Margaret had a baby, and two days after she got back from the hospital, she and her husband resumed sexual relations. This is considered to be repulsive by most Nagovisi. Ultimately she became pregnant again. She also acquired a lover, and they had repeated intercourse. Intercourse with a pregnant woman is considered repulsive by most Nagovisi, too. Her husband finally got angry about this and threw her down a cliff. She suffered a miscarriage. She brought charges against him because of the injury, and people said this one would go to the patrol officer, rather than merely being settled in local court.

3. Again, all names are pseudonyms.

4. I should perhaps note that people who are aware of some misbehavior on the part of a spouse may "save" their angry reaction until they themselves have caused trouble, then cite the previous offense as a distraction from or mitigation of their own actions.

5. In the rare event of virilocal residence, the wife leaves.

6. This woman figures into a number of my anecdotes involving physical violence.

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