WHY WAPE MEN DON'T BEAT THEIR WIVES: CONSTRAINTS TOWARD DOMESTIC TRANQUILITY IN A NEW GUINEA SOCIETY

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The West, as we know, is fascinated with violence. Western journalists, filmmakers, and anthropologists working in New Guinea have made the island famous for head-hunting, cannibalism, and male-female antagonism. The range of New Guinea societies, however, is great. While the gentler societies lack the riveting appeal of those that are more flamboyantly aggressive, they can be instructive. The Wape of Papua New Guinea's Sandaun (formerly West Sepik) Province are a case in point.

Like many other Melanesian peoples, the egalitarian Wape live in a mountainous tropical forest habitat in sedentary villages and are slash-and-burn horticulturalists. Marriage occurs through bride-wealth payments, polygyny is allowed but rare, postmarital residence is generally virilocal, and patrilineal clans are ideally exogamous while patrilineages are strictly so.[1] But the Wape differ from a number of the societies with whom they share these customs: Wape men do not beat their wives. This does not mean that conjugal relations are always harmonious, but it: is unusual for a man to slap his wife and I know of no instances where a woman suffered an injurious beating from her husband.

Because wife-beating is an accepted custom in many parts of Papua New Guinea and considered by the government to be a serious public health problem (Toft 1985), in this article I identify some of the factors

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or constraints that help explain the comparative tranquility of Wape domestic life. These constraints--located on various but intersecting sociocultural, psychological, historical, ecological, and physiological levels of analysis--are inextricably bound together in a complex circular relationship. Our present knowledge of this relationship does not warrant the postulating of constraints operating on one level as being more important than those on another, so the general tranquility of Wape domestic life cannot be explained by a simple "cause and effect" model favored by an experimental positivistic science. The explanatory model proposed here is an associational one, more descriptive than causal, whose very circularity is essential to the explanation.[2]

The data for this study, including a review of relevant court records, were collected during an eighteen-month field trip in 1970-1972 and brief revisits in 1982 and 1989. Although I have visited many of the villages of the approximately ten thousand Wape during my three trips to Wapeland, my view of Wape society and culture is as seen from Taute village, my principal fieldwork site.

Correlates of Wape Domestic Tranquility

Ethos and Emotions

The ethos of Wape society is markedly pacific. Although the society is not without its points of stress and the people not without passion concerning their personal relationships, the overall affective thrust of social life is to keep emotions, especially those that might lead to violence, under control. Even before Western contact, when enemy villages engaged in pay-back killings, the attacks might be years apart. Some Wape villages, on learning that the invading whites had banned warfare, abandoned the custom even before government patrols could intervene. During my fieldwork, I never saw a physical fight between men, between women, or even between children. The preferred Wape response to potential violence is conciliatory, not confrontational.[3] When dissension in village life does occur, as it inevitably does, quarrels tend to be defused before culminating in physical violence or, if someone does strike another, he or she does not strike back.

As a stranger to Wapeland, I had the first of several personal lessons in their gentle interaction style a few days after I moved into Taute village. When I shouted at a group of children crowding onto the raised and rotting veranda of our temporary house to get off, a man who had befriended me said reprovingly, "Speak gently!" The Wape perceive expatriates, especially men, as unpredictable and potentially bellicose.

To gain some control over expatriate emotions, villagers place magical ginger under the house ladder of a visiting patrol officer--and I imagine a visiting anthropologist as well--to soothe him as he climbs down into the village. Another time, when I rebuked a group of men during the building of our house for cutting down the ornamental shrubs that hid the outhouse, they simply turned and silently walked away.

Enculturating a resident anthropologist or Wape children is not always an easy task, but the methods are identical. Aggressive acts are met with disinterest, An enraged toddler is left alone to kick and scream on the ground until her or his reason returns. Children and anthropologists soon learn that public aggression is an embarrassing and nonrewarding activity. Consequently, the Wape restrain the expression of negative emotions toward others and are generally friendly in everyday village activities. Antipathy toward another is rarely expressed directly in public, though it may be expressed privately to a confidant.

Still, there are times when adults feel so personally transgressed and furious that they must do something more drastic than confiding their anger to a friend. Several alternatives are available. An offended person may gossip openly to others about the offense or, as everyone knows some sorcery, privately execute a punitive ritual. Or, for example, if a man's dog attacks and cripples a woman's piglet and the man makes no attempt to correct the wrong, in desperation she might go to his house and, standing outside, deliver a self-righteous harangue heard by all the neighbors while the transgressor and his family sit silently within. If the problem escalates, a meeting of the entire village is called by one of the concerned parties and anyone remotely involved with the problem should attend; not to go is to compromise one's integrity or innocence. Gathered on the front verandas of the houses surrounding the central plaza, men, women, and even children have their say until finally, perhaps several hours later, a consensus is reached.

I have stressed here the pacific ethos of Wape culture as well as indicated some of the actions resorted to when an individual's emotions must be expressed outwardly, namely gossiping, sorcery, haranguing, and public meetings. However, none of these actions--regardless of the degree of aggressive intent--usually involve direct physical violence. Later I will discuss two exceptions to this finding that document a darker side of Wape emotions.

The Gaze of the Ancestors

The Wape are not conciliatory solely because they have been socialized to believe that public anger is often unrewarding or humiliating. There

is a powerful sanctioning agent that helps to keep their behavior in check: the spirits of their dead ancestors. As Hollan has similarly observed for the Toraja of Indonesia, "fear of supernatural retribution and social disintegration motivate the control of anger and aggression" (1988:56). The Wape believe that at death an adult's spirit returns to lineage lands in the forest. The spirit is also believed to be a frequent visitor to the village, where it looks after its descendants by sending illness and bad luck to family enemies. There is a high incidence of illness in Wapeland, testimony enough to ancestral power.

One night while visiting on a neighbor's veranda, I idly inquired about a slight, unidentifiable sound and learned that it was my host's dead father benevolently signaling his presence. Ancestral spirits are believed to see and hear all. This strongly discourages arguments among villagers because a spirit may avenge a descendant by negatively influencing an opponent's hunting, gardening, or personal health. For this reason also, individuals will occasionally resort to Tok Pisin, the region's lingua franca, to express their anger publicly so the older ancestors who never learned it can't understand what is being said.

Frequent disagreements among family members or neighbors can jeopardize the welfare of the entire village. To appease the ancestors, a conciliatory ritual must be held where the opponents speak out, announcing that they are now friends and asking the spirits to desist in the punitive interventions.[4] A husband also knows that his wife's agnates as well as her classificatory mother's brothers are concerned about her welfare and, if he mistreats her, may resort to their ancestors or sorcery.

Gender Proximics

Another important factor pertaining to the absence of wife-beating is that Wape society, while acknowledging male-female differences in terms of dress and division of labor, is organized not to polarize gender differences but to deemphasize them. Husbands and wives use the same paths and sleep together in the same house with their children. Village boys and girls, including teenagers, play at ease with one another. The lightly constructed houses are close together so that aural privacy is at a minimum; even a modestly raised voice is heard by all the neighbors, who are also relatives. Menstruating mothers and daughters are not secluded in menstrual huts but remain at home where husbands, if they are not going hunting, continue to eat their wives' food. At puberty, boys begin to sleep separately in a village bachelors' house but still interact daily with their parents and siblings and usually take their meals with them at home. Nor are boys or youths secluded from their mothers

and sisters for initiation into manhood as in some New Guinea societies, where, often brutally, they are cleansed of female contamination in preparation for a warrior's career.

Female Status and Strategies

This is also a society where women and girls do not provide all of the child care. My tape-recorded interviews with male informants are punctuated with a baby-sitting father's asides to his restless toddler or the hungry cries of his infant. Fathers, as well as sons, take an active part in the care of infants and toddlers, especially when the mother is in the forest processing sago or collecting firewood.

This brings us to another important factor to explain why Wape husbands do not beat their wives: Wape women produce most of the food eaten, A typical meal consists of sago jelly with boiled greens--both the result of women's labor--and, with luck, a scrap of meat. While hunting is of great ritual and social importance to men, the introduction of the shotgun has seriously, and in some areas ruinously, depleted wild game.[5] Pigs, of which there are few, are killed primarily for ceremonial exchanges among kin. As monogamy, both in the known past and present, is the Wape norm, a husband is dependent upon a single wife to feed him.

Another point is that a young woman has considerable say in the choice of a husband, signaling a young man in whom she is interested by slipping him a small present of food or tobacco. If possible, women prefer to marry within their natal village and rarely marry into a village that is more than an hour or two walk from their father and brothers. Throughout a wife's marriage--divorce is unusual--she and her husband are in close contact with her agnatic kin through a continuing series of economic exchanges that necessitates back and forth visiting while her brothers hold special ritual sanctions over her children, members of her husband's lineage. By the same token, she is tied to her mother's lineage too, especially to her classificatory mother's brothers who, as already indicated, watch over her well-being and whose homes are available as a place of refuge. A woman who feels that her husband is abusive to her does not hesitate to move in with relatives, where she may stay for a week or more until they return with her to her husband's house, In no case may he seek her return. In the meantime, he becomes dependent on his agnates' wives to feed him or must find his own food. Neither choice is a pleasant one.

The women of a hamlet, or at least the one in which I lived, develop strong solidarity bonds, something I only learned through observation.

In the unlikely event that a couple becomes so angry during a quarrel that they begin to shout at each other, women of the hamlet, a few sometimes armed with large sticks, descend upon the house and stand around it until the woman joins them outside.

A factor that relates to the interaction style of women is that they usually do not act in ways to further provoke or escalate a husband's anger toward them but are able to terminate his abuse with a very dangerous and ritualized action. While both Wape men and women are highly sensitive to personal shaming, when a wife is deeply humiliated or shamed by her husband's behavior toward her, she usually does not return the insult but instead attempts suicide. While female suicide attempts are not uncommon in Papua New Guinea, in most communities they appear to be more frequently precipitated by a husband's brutal beatings, as among the Gainj (Johnson 1981) and Kaliai (Counts 1980), than by his shaming words.

Three young wives of our small hamlet unsuccessfully attempted suicide while I lived there by drinking poison made from the root of the deadly derris vine. Interestingly, in each case the woman lived in a household with her husband and one of his parents. In two of the cases a precipitating event was criticism by her husband for not supplying enough food for the family.

There are no reliable suicide statistics for Wape society. But, on the basis of my own data and that of Dr. Lynette Wark Murray (pers. com., 1988), the experienced missionary physician who patrolled Wapeland during my initial fieldwork, suicide attempts by unhappy wives, although hushed up by the community, do occur and follow a definite cultural pattern.[6] Because an in-marrying wife's suicide is deeply stigmatizing to the husband's lineage, a woman who survives a suicide attempt finds herself the center of solicitous community attention. It is a desperate way to "get even" with an overly critical or abusive husband but, in the cases I observed, most effective, with the added compensation that it generated a favorable change in his domestic demeanor.

Although Wape men do not often commit suicide (I heard of only one case), there is a corresponding dark side to men's behavior. While in the field I observed two instances (Mitchell 1987:197-203) and learned of several others where a man, said to be temporarily possessed by a wandering ghost, attempted to attack fellow villagers with his bow and arrows (cf. Langness 1965). These amok attacks occur only to men and are episodic, often with long periods of lucidity between them. A man so possessed is considered "crazy" by other villagers and is not held completely responsible for his actions. Although the target of a man's attack

is socially diffuse with the opportunity to direct part of his aggression toward his wife, he never does.

Diet and Drugs

While the use of drugs, including alcohol, alone cannot make wife-beaters out of husbands, it should be noted that the Wape do not have easy access to alcohol, as is true in some parts of Papua New Guinea where wife-beating is culturally accepted. The addictive substances that are available to the Wape, namely tobacco and betel nut, are not gender differentiated: men and women alike are heavy users of both.

Severe protein and caloric deficiency are characteristic of the Wape diet and may, in a highly generalized way, be related to their pacific temperament and domestic tranquility. Sago is notoriously low in nutrients and the mountain-dwelling Wape, unlike most sago eaters who live on the coast or along large rivers, cannot obtain adequate protein from fish. Wape soils are poor and, although sago is supplemented with seasonal garden produce, gardens are small, unfenced, and poorly cultivated. Medical studies of growth and development indicate the birth weight of the Wape infant is one of the lowest reported in the world and subsequent growth in height and weight is slow, with the onset of secondary sex characteristics correspondingly delayed (Wark and Malcolm 1969). For example, a girl's first menstrual period occurs at a mean age of 18.4 years. There also is a progressive and marked loss of weight with age in both male and female adults. Many villagers suffer from chronic upper respiratory infections and malaria is holoendemic and uncontrolled. Recent studies indicate that the health problems of the Wape are still severe (Pumuye 1985; Division of Health Department of West Sepik 1986).

Christian Mores and Government Law

Finally, we must consider the influence of the Catholic and Protestant missionaries and local government officials in respect to the absence of wife-beating in Wapeland. All Wape villages are under the influence of either Christian Brethren or Franciscan missionaries while, more recently, an indigenous fundamentalist church, New Guinea Revival, has also gathered considerable support. All of these churches are strong advocates of a harmonious family life and marital amity. The laws of the country further support these values, and government and health officials distribute literature and lecture to villagers about them. But, as

we already have seen, "domestic peace" is not a new idea to the Wape people. The importance of the churches" and state's moral rhetoric and sanctions regarding domestic life is not one of innovation but the reinforcement on another level of contemporary Wape society's own tradition of domestic tranquility.

Conclusions

To answer the question of why Wape men don't beat their wives in a country where wife-beating is a major public health problem, I have noted and discussed some of the implicated constraints. These can be summarized as follows:

- A pacific and conciliatory cultural ethos supported by churches and the state
- Non-polarization of gender differences
- Punitive intervention by watchful ancestral spirits
- Women instrumental in selecting their husbands
- Monogamy
- Married couples domiciled among watchful relatives
- Wives as principal food providers
- Near-absence of alcohol
- Nutritionally deficient diet
- Solidarity bonds among hamlet women
- Threat of a wife's suicide if her husband shames her
- Women's agnates and classificatory mother's brothers responsive to their welfare

None of these constraints alone can explain the relatively tranquil nature of Wape domestic life. When viewed as an interrelated cluster, though, they help us understand the absence of wife-beating. If a society has very poor nutrition, a pacific conciliatory ethos, low access to alcohol, watchful and succoring neighbors and relatives, vengeful ancestors, husbands dependent on a single wife for sustenance, nonpolarization of the sexes, and the threat of a wife's suicide if shamed by her husband, it is difficult to conceive of a marital relationship progressing to a state where a wife is being beaten.

However, this inquiry into the absence of Wape wife-beating has uncovered another form of Wape domestic violence--attempted suicide by females--with a cultural scenario of its own. In desperation, wives humiliated by their husbands "beat up" on themselves and, indirectly, their spouses by attempting to poison themselves. The difference is that attempted suicide, unlike being beaten, is a self-empowering act of rectitude, an aggressive action against one's person that, if one survives,

may reshape a damaged husband-wife relationship more equitably. To Wape men, the possibility of a wife's attempted suicide is a sobering symbol for the limits of oppression. To women, it is a desperate act fraught with peril, an act some know is worth the risk.

NOTES

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1. For a fuller account of Wape society see Mitchell 1973, 1978a, 1978b, 1987, 1988a, 1988b, and 1990.

2. I wish to emphasize that the explanation offered here is culture-specific. For example, the domestic placidity documented for the Dugum Dani in Irian Jaya by Heider (1979:78-84) or, in this volume, for the Nagovisi in the Solomon Islands by Jill Nash cannot be explained by the same constraints discussed here. For an exploratory attempt to rank factors in a "multiple correlate" model on the reverse problem of wife-beating and family violence, see Burgess and Draper 1989.

3. On the basis of my 1982 and 1989 observations and information gleaned from villagers as well as government officials and health workers who deal directly with the people, this conciliatory characteristic of Wape domestic life has not changed since my 1970-1972 fieldwork.

4. Because the two shotguns in Taute village were owned collectively by hamlet members, poor hunting was usually explained in terms of ancestral revenge for village dissension. For a detailed discussion of the relationship of hunting, ancestral spirits, and village arguments see Mitchell 1973 and 1987 (167-187).

5. During my 1989 visit, however, I was told that wild game is gradually reappearing, due to the current prohibition against firearms because of disorder in other parts of the province.

6. See Mitchell 1987 (204-208) for ethnographic details regarding the ritualized aspects of Wape wives' suicide attempts.

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