SPARE THE ROD AND SPOIL THE WOMAN? FAMILY VIOLENCE IN ABELAM SOCIETY

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This article addresses the question of differing cultural definitions of terms such as "violence" and "spouse abuse" by examining the nature of family "violence" in Abelam society. Among the Abelam, it is not uncommon for men to punish women physically. These men may be husbands, elder brothers, fathers, or other close relatives, When beatings are not too severe or too frequent, this behavior is socially approved by uninvolved persons of both sexes. Abelam men regard such physical punishment in much the same spirit as Americans regard child discipline. They believe that occasional beatings are sometimes "necessary" in order to socialize women properly, Women tolerate occasional beatings, particularly when they admit fault. If they feel unjustly accused, however, women may defend themselves, sometimes employing counterviolence. Cases of "pure husband beating" are very rare, however. Nearly all Abelam family "violence" involves behavior that is considered to be discipline of wives by husbands or of sisters by elder brothers.

In American society, I believe it is considered culturally appropriate to discipline children with occasional physical punishment. A slap across the behind, following several verbal warnings, would probably not be considered child "abuse." Indeed, I have seen the public physical punishment of children in supermarkets, shopping malls, and so forth on numerous occasions, Only when such discipline becomes too severe or too frequent is it culturally defined as "abuse." On the other hand, it is probably never considered "justified' in American society for a hus-

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band to strike his wife, and I believe all such incidents would be considered "abusive."

In Abelam society, these patterns seem to be almost reversed. I am sure that Abelam would regard many (if not most) Americans as being physically abusive towards their children (see Korbin 1981 and 1987 for differing cultural standards of child "abuse"). Abelam rarely if ever strike their own children. Withholding food is a much more common punishment, often accompanied by a matter-of-fact statement of cause and effect: "Well, you didn't do your share of the work, so you don't get your share of the food."

However, just as most American families sustain a level of physical child "abuse" considered inappropriate by Abelam standards, most Abelam marriages sustain occasional physical punishment of wives that would be judged "abusive" by American standards. Such discipline of women by their male relatives is the focus of this essay. In the following pages, I will provide an overview of Abelam family violence. By analyzing a series of representative cases, I examine the nature, frequency, and social context of family violence against women in Abelam society.

Ethnographic Background

The Abelam are non-Austronesian speakers living in the foothills of the Prince Alexander Mountains in East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. They are a horticultural group, densely populating lowlands and subsisting mostly on yams, taro, sweet potatoes and sago supplemented by pork, small game, and various garden products. The focus of this study is the Samukundi dialect group, comprising about ten thousand of the roughly sixty thousand Abelam. The Samukundi inhabit the northernmost part of Abelam territory, extending well into the Prince Alexander Mountains. Neligum village, the research site, is in the extreme north of Samukundi territory. Neligum has experienced the population explosion characteristic of the entire Abelam tribe since contact; its population has doubled in the fifteen years in which I have worked there. Yet there is still adequate land in the virgin forest to the north. Thus Neligum has not experienced the severe land shortages and concomitant land disputes that plague other Abelam populations.

The Abelam are nominally patrilineal and patrilocal; more than 80 percent of married couples live near the husband's family. Marriages are generally contracted between partners in different sections of the same village or from neighboring villages, so women are never far from their natal homes. Another pattern relevant to the present discussion is the tendency of Abelam to visit frequently with friends and relatives and to

sleep where they visit. In a time allocation study in which I visited people in the evening and nighttime hours (Scaglion 1986a), people were frequently not found sleeping at home. Thus, when family violence erupts or is expected, family members can avoid confrontations temporarily simply by visiting away from home for a few days.

The Case Sample

I began my research in Neligum in 1974, about a year after a local court was established at Maprik, the subdistrict headquarters. In this still-colonial period the introduced court was almost never used voluntarily by Abelam and, with a few exceptions (Scaglion 1976), conflict management was carried on much as it had been since European contact. Conducting a study of conflict management in Neligum, I remained in residence throughout calendar year 1975 and used the case method (Black and Metzger 1965; Epstein 1967; Frake 1969; Gulliver 1969) to collect a sixty-five-case sample of the conflict cases that occurred in that year. These cases were recorded in detail on specially designed forms and included relevant data concerning the relationships between litigants, history of the dispute, nature of previous disputes, and so forth. Taken together, these cases constitute the total of all incidents that the people themselves defined as "trouble cases." For the Abelam, trouble cases are incidents that cause sufficient disruption in village harmony to result in remedy action. For this analysis, it is important to realize that mild, disciplinary beating of wives by husbands is socially sanctioned and *not* considered "trouble." Thus, this sample underrepresents the actual incidence of what Americans might view as family violence. In all of the spousal abuse cases in this sample, at least some persons considered the beatings sufficiently severe, frequent, or unjustified to constitute abuse by Abelam standards.

In 1977, village courts were introduced in the area. This changed the basic process of conflict management by integrating traditional and introduced remedy agents (Scaglion 1979, 1985). Since then, more extensive exposure to Western social patterns, especially through schooling, has altered the nature of Abelam family life. Therefore, quantitative data on the frequency of various types of conflict presented here are from the sixty-five trouble cases recorded in 1975 (analyzed in Scaglion 1976). This sample of all the conflicts involving the 553 Neligum residents in that year illustrates fairly "traditional" patterns. Cases reported in this article are also taken from this sample. To assess more recent social changes at the conclusion of the article, I have relied on cases that I observed after 1975, either in village courts or in the village itself.

The Nature of Family Violence

The 1975 sample of sixty-five cases shows that what Westerners today consider family violence was not uncommon in traditional Abelam society. Fifteen of these cases (23.1 percent of all disputes) involved physical violence between immediate family members. These cases, broken down by structural relationship between disputants, are detailed in Table 1.

In another sample of 101 cases collected during 1974-1976, mainly "memory" cases from the precontact and early colonial era, twenty-two (21.8 percent) involved violence between immediate family members. These displayed much the same pattern as seen in Table 1.

In the category of spousal violence, the overwhelming number of 1975 cases involve male physical abuse of women (82 percent). The others involve attacks on husbands by armed wives, angered because of sexual jealousies. The physical violence against women is undoubtedly a long-standing pattern. I once noticed a three-inch-long scar on the back of my Abelam grandmother's head. When I asked her about it, she explained that she got it many years ago, when she was a newly married woman, before she had had children. This was "when people were still using the stone axes and knives." Her husband thought she had been seeing another man. When he accused her, she denied it. They quarreled, and he cut her with a bamboo knife. This incident closely resembles cases collected in 1975 (see below).

Spousal Violence

My impression is that for most Abelam couples the level of spousal violence is rather low. The husband might slap the wife mildly with an

TABLE 1. **Nature of Abelam Family Violence**

Relationship between Disputants	Number of Cases	Percentage
spouses	11	64.7
Siblings	3	17.6
Close intergenerational	2	11.8
Co-wives	1	5.9
Total	17[a]	100.0

Source: Based on Scaglion 1976.

[a]Exceeds number of individual cases (15) because some cases involved two types of violence.

open hand or deliver a single blow with a piece of firewood on rather rare occasions, perhaps once every few years. Newly married couples usually experience a period of adjustment in which a mutually tolerable level of spousal violence is established. By mutually tolerable violence, I do not mean to suggest that women are always satisfied with their situations. However, most women regard a certain amount of physical violence as an unfortunate part of married life. When I interviewed women about past beatings, particularly if the beatings were very mild, women often said that they were extremely angry at the time but later realized that they had been ‘wrong and so they could accept the situation without much bitterness. If the level of physical violence against a woman is sufficiently low and infrequent that she does not regard her husband as “abusive,” I consider the violence “tolerable” to the couple.

There are, however, a few men who seem unusually abusive by nature, particularly during their younger years. Their marriages tend to be short-lived, not surviving the adjustment period. There are also couples who seem to sustain a rather high, recurring level of violence throughout their married years that is not “mutually tolerable.” The following three cases illustrate fairly typical patterns of spousal violence that cause trouble in the village.

A Newly Married Young Couple. Wiseke,[1] a young man of nineteen, went to a yam festival at a neighboring village on 22 August 1975. These festivals take place following nearly six months of ritual sexual abstinence, and a great deal of courtship and sexual behavior takes place during the late night hours. Wiseke had not told his relatively new (second) wife, Kurepak, twenty-one, that he was going. He stayed overnight, returning home late the next morning.

When he finally returned, Kurepak yelled at him. He became angry, beat her unconscious with his fists, and walked off. Her in-laws tended her and sent for her father, Sambisany. Her injuries were so severe that her father feared she would die. As he tended her, one of *his* classificatory fathers (the young woman’s grandfather), having heard of the trouble, arrived at the scene. He was so angered at the extent of Kurepak’s injuries that he borrowed a spear and set out in search of Wiseke, vowing to kill him. Wiseke had hidden himself well, though, and was not to be found.

Wiseke laid low for about a week, and Kurepak eventually recovered. Her father suggested that she divorce Wiseke, but she refused. He was an extremely good-looking young man and she didn’t want to leave him. As a second wife, she knew that her leaving temporarily would be

a bad strategy; it would give her co-wife a chance to "strengthen" her hold on him and to "poison his mind" against her. She determined to return to her husband.

However, her father and family had been opposed to the marriage from the beginning. It seems that Sambisany, her father, had married Wiseke's aunt as a second wife and shortly afterward his first wife, Kurepak's mother, had died. He suggested that sorcery by Wiseke's kin group had been the cause,

When he couldn't convince his daughter to leave Wiseke, Sambisany lectured her, saying, "I didn't want you to marry him in the first place but you wouldn't listen and went to live with him anyway. They killed your mother and now they'll kill you. Well, that's your affair but Wiseke hasn't paid bride-price yet. I'll send word to him to pay. Then if he wants to kill you it's his business." After this was done, Sambisany calmed his classificatory father down. In any case, the woman's grandfather had ceased looking for Wiseke when it was obvious that she would recover.

Subsequent Developments: This couple divorced a few years later. Wiseke has shown himself to be an incorrigible womanizer who has never settled down. He has had a number of wives and girlfriends, and displayed a pattern of physical abuse of women that is definitely not socially approved. However, when his wives have been unwilling to leave him, their male relatives have given limited support.

A Middle-Aged Couple. Saatkwak, a forty-eight-year-old married man with three children, had been having an affair with Leves, a fifty-year-old widow with one child. He began referring to her as his "second wife," although she didn't live with him or cook for him. Since Abelam marriages often begin as rather de facto affairs, cohabitation and sharing food are commonly regarded as signs that a couple is actually married.

Manyge, a woman of forty-six who had been married to Saatkwak for many years, became angry that he was referring to Leves as a second wife, although she had previously been ignoring their affair. On Monday, 5 May 1975, she confronted him about it. She became angry and began scolding him in public. He became angry, picked up a piece of firewood, and hit her over the head with it. It was not the first time he had physically abused her. He hit her about the head several times as she attempted to protect herself with her arms, whereupon she ran away.

Later that afternoon she went to the hamlet of a big-man, Waama, the principal mediator for her and her husband's ceremonial group.

Because he was busy, he asked her to wait for another time to have the case heard. But she was still angry and wanted to press her case immediately. He suggested she go to see the local government councillor. She went, but he was not home, and she determined to take the case to the local court. She lodged her complaint with the police, who told her to bring her husband in. She approached the big-man, Waama, again and he helped her bring her husband to the police station later that week. By this time she had cooled down, however, and refused to press charges.

When the three returned together to the village, she became afraid of possible reprisals by her husband and ran away again. She stayed for a few days with a female friend who lived in a different ceremonial group within the same village. Then she went to stay with her brother in her neighboring natal village.

On May 12, Saatkwak went to her brother's house to bring her back. The brother did not seem to want to take sides in the dispute, and Manyge agreed to return to Neligum with her husband. Later that day, though, when Saatkwak left for another neighboring village to help carry ritual objects for a ceremony, Manyge returned to her brother's house.

On May 17, Manyge voluntarily decided to return once again to her home. When she arrived, her husband was away attending a yam festival in a neighboring village. He arrived home very late and there was no incident that night. Nevertheless, the big-man, Waama, feared more trouble. Knowing of this couple's history of marital problems and that the husband frequently struck the wife, he suggested to several of the husbands male relatives that they keep an eye on him. If he became physically abusive (without cause) they were instructed to beat *him.*

Five months later the couple argued again, and Saatkwak struck Manyge in the face with his open hand. Waama was sent for to arbitrate. Manyge was accusing her husband of being involved with yet another woman, but this time apparently without good reason. After trying unsuccessfully to calm both parties, Waama left, telling them that he was sick of this behavior and that it was now their own affair.

Subsequent Developments: This couple has continued to have problems over the past fifteen years but are still together. The husband continues to beat or strike his wife frequently during their quarrels. By emic standards his actions are right on the borderline of abuse. Some people describe him as abusive; others feel that he is justified. Many people consider the wife to be hot-headed and feel that she often precipitates their fights.

Another Middle-Aged Couple. In the wave of cargo-cult beliefs immediately preceding independence, people became convinced that another country was coming to "boss" Papua New Guinea (Scaglion 1983). Awungele, a forty-eight-year-old married man, cut a great deal of bamboo to build a rest house for the new "country." But after hearing a lot of conflicting stories about what would actually happen at independence, he thought better of it. Maknambinje, a woman of fifty who had married Wano, fifty-two, after his first wife died, was having an affair with this man Awungele. Realizing that he had much extra bamboo, she approached her own husband about building a cookhouse for her and mentioned that their neighbor, Awungele, had extra bamboo. The husband approached Awungele and they agreed to build the house together.

After the frame was erected, Wano and Maknambinje had a fight. Wano had frequently threatened his wife with a piece of firewood or a bush knife and had beaten her over relatively minor matters. On this particular occasion, he slapped her across the side of the face and told her to build her own cookhouse. After this, Awungele, the lover, finished the house alone. This angered the husband.

The case festered for a few months. Finally, at a village meeting on 10 November 1975, it was discussed. Awungele denied knowing that the husband had refused to build the house. He claimed that he had had some spare time and just did it. Public opinion seemed to run against him. Most people believed that Maknambinje had convinced him to complete the house after her husband had refused.

After Awungele told his side of the story, the husband Wano, in the sarcastic style characteristic of such situations, said, "Ah, her husband is dead, and so you put up a cook house for her." Wano had previously tried to convince his wife to move to a different part of the village, since he suspected her affair with Awungele. Now, at the village meeting, he repeated his request that they move. She replied that she wished to remain in their present location until she died. He said, "Oh, I see, you two would like to marry. All right, you two can stay together and I'll leave."

But several of the big-men who were mediating the dispute said no, that wasn't right, a woman should go with her husband. After hearing all this, Awungele said he didn't want to hear any more of this talk and denied having an affair with Maknambinje.

While no definite "orders" were given and no particular decisions reached, exhortations were made for the couple to stay together, and it was more or less understood that this would happen.

Subsequent Developments: The married couple resided in separate hamlets for a time, but eventually they came together again. The problems were never really resolved. The pattern of wife-beating continued on a sporadic basis. The woman is now deceased.

The above cases demonstrate the usual patterns of Abelam family violence. In the first case, a young man seriously abused his wife. This is most common in the early years of marriage. If the husband does not moderate his beatings to a socially acceptable level the wife usually leaves him, temporarily at first and then permanently as the marriage ultimately breaks up, as happened in this instance. In other cases, newly married spouses fight but get together again after a cooling-off period, and the level of violence progressively declines. Still other couples display recurring patterns of spouse abuse serious enough to cause trouble but which seem to be tolerable enough for the marriage to remain intact. The above cases also show that sexual jealousies are common causes of family violence and that polygynous marriages can cause severe problems until adjustments are made.

When women are severely abused they are not always physically passive, as were the women in the previous cases. Some women use violence to defend themselves. Others attack their husbands with a weapon. Again, this sort of behavior is most common in the early stages of marriages when couples are making adjustments. Just as some men seem particularly prone to spouse abuse, some "hot-blooded" women (as they are called by the Abelam) seem particularly prone to turning weapons against their spouses. The following is a typical case. Sexual jealousy is again the ultimate cause.

A Wife Attacks Her Husband. Paal, a twenty-eight-year-old man, had two wives. He shot a wallaby on 19 September 1975 and hung it up in his house. His second wife, Sapasalik, a young woman to whom he had been married for only a few months, took it down and prepared to cook it. His first wife, Nyangilak, to whom he had been married for many years and with whom he had three children, did not approve of the second wife. She told her co-wife to leave the wallaby alone, that it belonged to her. The second wife said that she was hungry and that she intended to cook it. The two began to fight. They grabbed at one another's clothing and hair and slapped each other. The husband intervened, pulling the two apart, but did not take sides. The wallaby remained uncooked.

A few days later, on September 22, Paal shot an opossum and gave it

to his first wife to cook. When it was nearly ready to eat, he began to worry about a possible quarrel concerning its distribution, so he asked his second wife to help him cut some *pitpit* (wild sugarcane) in the bush. The second wife refused, saying that she wanted to stay and eat the opossum. When he grabbed her arm to pull her along with him, she slashed him with her machete, resulting in a deep cut along the side of his wrist.

The first wife then came to the husband's aid. She grabbed her co-wife's hair and pulled her to the ground. Then she began beating her with fists. A bystander, a neighbor and friend of the husband, pulled the two women apart and calmed everyone.

Subsequent Developments: After a year or two of adjustment, this family seems to have solved its problems. Nyangilak appears to have accepted her co-wife and Paal has remained married to both women for the past fifteen years. Sapasalik has had three children, and there has been little if any family violence in the past decade.

Brother-Sister and Father-Daughter Violence

Cases of spousal abuse and retaliation are the most common types of Abelam family violence. However, brothers disciplining sisters and, less frequently, fathers or other close male relatives disciplining daughters are not uncommon. The above cases show that abused wives frequently seek shelter with their male relatives for a time, most frequently with their brothers. Brothers have a responsibility to provide a home for their sisters whenever they are in need. They also have an interest in their sisters' upbringing. Violence between brothers and sisters generally involves elder brothers beating their younger sisters. The cause might be sexual behavior with inappropriate persons or at inappropriate times, failing to do their share of work, failing to meet family obligations, or similar unseemly behavior. The following is a typical case.

A Brother and His Sisters. On Friday night, 27 November 1975, a dance was held at Bainyik, where there is a vocational school and an agricultural research station. November is well into the ceremonial-yam growing season and taboos against all sexual activity are in effect. Abelam believe that sex stunts the growth of ceremonial yams.

The next morning Gumde, a young man twenty-one years old but nevertheless the senior active male of his lineage, noticed that his two sisters, Jejemu and Yaave, had not returned home the night before. A

few years previously, several young men from the village, including Gumde, had suspected their sisters of attending these dances, waited for them along the road after one such event, and beat them. They were concerned about possible sexual relationships and indirect pollution (see Scaglion 1986b), which would damage their yam crop.

That morning, when Gumde went to his garden, he saw Jejemu sitting in front of the garden house. When she saw him coming she ran away, hoping he hadn't noticed her. This confirmed his suspicions that she had attended the dance. He took a shortcut back to the main part of the village and caught her. He cut a switch and beat her with it, mostly trying to hit her buttocks. Then he slapped her several times with his open hand as he yelled.

She ran into the house, crying, as he stood outside, continuing to yell at her: What did she think she was doing? This was yam season and he didn't want her running around. He was sick of this sort of behavior. A small crowd began to gather, including a few of the girl's other male relatives, who supported her brother.

After a while, the brother left to cut timber in the bush. When he returned to the village that afternoon, he found the younger sister and the above scene was repeated. The two girls spent the rest of the afternoon sulking in the house.

Subsequent Developments: Neither of these two sisters has married over the years, which is unusual. They remain under the brother's protection, however, and he helps support them economically. (He also supports the older sister's two children. The younger sister has no children.) This demonstrates the vested interest brothers have in their sisters' activities. Sisters always have a home with their brothers, throughout life if they never marry.

I have never seen or heard of a level of physical violence in brother-sister cases that exceeds the levels of social tolerance. In a few instances there is social disapproval of the causes of these beatings, however. People sometimes feel that brothers are too strict or are mistaken in their suspicions. In such cases, sisters may feel that their punishments were unjust and may seek shelter with friends for a time, while community gossip or comments cause their brothers to rethink their own actions.

Just as sisters are sometimes dependent on their brothers, the reverse is also true. In later life, sisters feed their brothers whenever the brothers' wives are in the menstrual huts, particularly when they are living close by. When sisters have married into a nearby village, they look

after their brothers whenever the brothers visit the "new" village for ritual occasions, which are fairly common. They may also look after their brothers' friends at these times.

In addition to these practical considerations of mutual support and interdependence between brother and sister, there is usually a great deal of love and respect in such relationships. These factors act in concert to keep violence at a low level. Nevertheless, it is a level that probably exceeds Western standards.

Because of the lifelong ties between brothers and sisters, brothers are the male relatives who most commonly discipline unmarried women. But not all young women have brothers and many have brothers who are very young. In such cases, a father or the closest adult male relative will take responsibility for disciplining a woman. The following case involves an uncle who acted in lieu of a brother.

An Older Male Relative and a Young Female. Simon was a young man from a Sepik River culture linguistically related to the Abelam. He had come to visit friends in Neligum village and had stayed for some time. After about a month, he began living with a young woman from the village in a trial marriage. Neither he nor his hosts had asked the young woman's relatives for permission. Furthermore, although he claimed to be single, discreet inquiries by a village elder with Sepik River connections revealed that Simon already had two wives. The discovery of this deception precipitated a conflict case in which it was decided that the young woman would break off the relationship and go back to live with her own family. While conventions of hospitality did not permit driving Simon out of the village, village elders were angry and some began to watch him closely.

A neighboring village was planning to hold a *singsing* (ceremony) to dedicate a new *haus tambaran* (ceremonial house) on 25 April 1975, and Simon decided to attend. That afternoon Nyayala, a forty-two-year-old man, overheard another young woman, Baambil, seventeen, making plans to secretly meet Simon at the ceremony. Nyayala was the girl's *wau* (mother's brother). In fact, their relationship was especially close in that Nyayala and Baambil's father had married through sister exchange. Although Nyayala was angry he said nothing. Since his brother-in-law (the girl's actual father) was away and the young woman had no brothers, he decided to handle the matter himself. He went to his brother's hamlet, which was located adjacent to a path along which the girl would have to travel in order to attend the ceremony. About 7:30 P.M. he saw Simon pass by on his way to the *singsing,*

and about ten minutes later he saw Baambil approaching along the same route.

He called out to her, and, when she came close to him, he grabbed her arm. He then began to drag her through the center of the village back to her parents' house, periodically hitting her buttocks with a switch he had cut. The whole way he berated her: Hadn't she learned anything from the other girl's experience? She should stay home and help her parents. She shouldn't be running off all the time chasing after young men. While the beating was undoubtedly painful, the young woman seemed to be even more upset by the public humiliation: the next day she wore a cloth over her head to "hide her shame."

Subsequent Developments: Soon after this incident, the young woman married a man from a neighboring village. The marriage seems to have been a happy one and the couple has remained together for many years. No further incidents of physical violence between the woman and her uncle have occurred.

Discussion

An understanding of the Abelam attitudes toward brother-sister and father-daughter violence sheds light on cultural attitudes toward spousal violence. Abelam men believe that many women, and particularly young women, are inclined to be somewhat "lazy" and "wayward." Whereas children are not fully developed human beings and do not always understand the consequences of their actions, Abelam believe that females who have had their first-menstruation ceremony are adults and should act accordingly. When they do not, their actions reflect badly on their entire families. In such cases, a close male relative must take responsibility for protecting the family reputation by disciplining the woman.

In many traditional Abelam marriages, more common in the past than now, the husband was considerably older than the wife. This was particularly true when the woman was a second or third wife. In such cases, particularly during the early stages of marriage, the husband acted more like a father or elder brother in disciplining his young wife. When spouses are more closely matched in age the logic is not so clear, but Abelam men nevertheless seem to feel that much of the responsibility for "necessary" discipline of a young woman falls to her husband after marriage. In principle, traditional Abelam women also subscribe to these notions.

Traditional Abelam women have a great deal of power in formulat-

ing cultural standards of physical abuse, however. If a man punishes his wife (or sister or daughter) sufficiently frequently or severely to be culturally defined as abusive, village women can censure him by collectively withholding services. His own mother and sisters can and will refuse to cook for him, making the same sort of matter-of-fact statement of cause and effect that they use to discipline children: "Well, you beat your wife for no reason, so don't expect help from me." Male friends and relatives can also withhold support from a wife-beater, and a battered woman can always seek shelter with friends or relatives. In this manner, cultural standards of acceptable family violence are collectively set. Abelam women acting in concert have enormous power here, for men depend on them for a variety of things because of the sexual division of labor and the complementarity of the sexes (Scaglion 1986b).

Of course, social change in Abelam society has been pronounced in the past decade as most of the younger generation have received some schooling and considerable exposure to Western culture. Abelam family structure more closely approximates European patterns nowadays. In the past, polygynous marriages were more common than they are now. The first census of Neligum village that I have been able to locate is from 1957. It shows that 11.8 percent of all marriages were polygynous. My own data from Upper Neligum show that 10.0 percent of all marriages in 1975 were polygynous, compared with only 4.8 percent in 1987. Thus the creation of new polygynous unions, once a considerable cause of sexual jealousy, is declining, and spouses tend to be closer in age. Still, adultery or suspected adultery remains the major cause of contemporary domestic strife.

My intuitive opinion is that the frequency of spousal violence has increased in recent years. Young women are now much more likely to strike their husbands over matters (other than sexual jealousies) that traditionally they would have accepted or over new forms of behavior of which they do not approve. Indeed, I witnessed two such incidents during my last field trip, Both occurred in relatively new marriages. One involved a wife angry over her husbands playing cards rather than tending to domestic duties, the other involved an argument over bride-price. In the bride-price case the husband retaliated by also hitting the wife; in the card-playing case he did not. Nevertheless, fifteen or twenty years ago it would have been rare for a woman to strike her husband first.

The Abelam have become a much more mobile population in the past twenty years. Once there was little access to vehicular transportation and people remained close to home due to fears of tribal warfare and

sorcery. Today, young men and women travel considerable distances for school, work, or recreation. In a small, face-to-face society sexual encounters are difficult to hide and suspicions are usually well grounded. In contemporary Abelam society, however, young married people are often suspicious of spousal adultery, frequently without proof. Whereas a guilty wife, recognizing fault, would be likely to accept a mild beating or severe tongue-lashing, an unjustly accused wife is more likely to return like for like, escalating the severity of spousal violence. In new-style marriages today, women are more likely to engage in both offensive and defensive physical violence against husbands than previously.

Now as in the past, Abelam marriages seem to be characterized by a fairly low level of violence after the initial adjustment period of several years. In contrast to the changing nature of spousal violence patterns, there has not been much change in the nature or relatively low level of brother-sister violence. However, I would still argue that all forms of family violence against women discussed in this article continue to be sustained at levels that would be considered abusive by American standards. Abelam regard a certain level of physical violence against women as culturally acceptable. Nevertheless, Abelam women who feel that they are being physically abused can always seek shelter in their natal homes or with friends, where they receive both physical and moral support, These are options not always open to their American counterparts.

NOTES

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1. This name is a pseudonym, as are all the names of Abelam disputants mentioned in this article. The pseudonyms used are all names of bird species in the Abelam language. These are commonly used as personal names.

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