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Bridewealth and Dowry Revisited

The Position of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa and North India¹

by Stanley J. Tambiah

This essay attempts a comparison of the "position" of women in a variety of societies in Sub-Saharan Africa and among the higher social strata of North India. The comparative method adopted attempts to delineate the valuations and roles of women from "within the traditions" of the societies examined, that is, in terms of their sociocultural formulations and practices, in order to highlight their distinctive emphases and designs. The opportunity is taken to evaluate and rethink some of the proposals made by Goody and Tambiah in *Bridewealth and Dowry* in the light of recent ethnographic information and in terms of more defensible comparative units.

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1. This paper is a revised version of a paper originally written for a Wenner-Gren conference on gender hierarchies held in January 1987. I was, however, unable to attend the conference and withdrew the paper. I am grateful to Barbara Miller for her useful comments.

Global terms such as "gender hierarchy" and "position of women" are difficult to apply precisely and to give substance in concrete terms in the analysis of a single society, let alone in the comparison of societies. In my mind, the concept of hierarchy evokes three images. One is stratification—the vertical division of social strata or groups ranked on a graduated scale. The second is social classes locked in relations of competition and conflict. The third is a holistic and organic picture of strata ranked or evaluated in terms of their contribution to the social whole. The Warner and Lunt (1941) account of social classes in Yankee City is in the mode of stratification as ranked strata. The Marxian scheme, that of differentially endowed and evaluated classes in conflict, is in the second mode, and Dumont's (1970) account of the systemic relations between *varna* and castes in India is in the third. Bloch's (1961) discussion of the feudal estates in France between the 9th and 11th centuries A.D. can be viewed as being in both Marxian and Dumontian modes. If these instances are our exemplars, it is difficult to talk of gender hierarchy in the same way when in no historical society I know have men and women, male and female genders, constituted separate social strata, classes, castes, or estates that articulated to form a global societal system. Similarly, any global characterization of the "position of women" is difficult because it is unclear whether even within the confines of a single society the various statuses of women and their relations to one another and the statuses of men can be meaningfully aggregated and summed up. If such aggregations are difficult to construct within a society, they are even more difficult to arrive at in the comparison of societies.

In the face of these difficulties, one possible method open to the analyst would be to take an externalist stance and devise a list of dimensions on which the status or position of women could be measured; the array of measurements could then be viewed as constituting profiles of women's position capable of comparative use. Thus an anthropologist might draw up a list of measures that would allow the study of differences between men and women, both within and between societies, in terms of the relative degree of control over persons in a variety of domains:

1. Rights of men and women to inherit, own, transmit, and dispose of properties and wealth of various kinds.
2. The rights of husband and wife with regard to property acquired and held in the course of marriage and the rights accruing after the death of a spouse to the surviving partner.
3. The economic roles and occupational activities open to men and women, the actual rates of recruitment to them, and the comparative rates of remuneration and payment.
4. The freedom of marital partners to initiate divorce, the grounds for divorce, and the allocation of children to one or the other parent thereafter.
5. The degree of freedom of physical movement and social interaction allowed men and women of different ages and at different stages of the domestic cycle.

6. The opportunities for participation in the economic, religious, and political realms, e.g., participation in commerce, performance of rituals, eligibility for office and the exercise of power in the political arena, etc.

7. The preference for separate male and female societies, associations, and groupings for special purposes and interests rather than for mixed participation.

8. The special features of the speech codes or linguistic forms that signal gender and sexual differences, evaluations, and specializations.

Such a list of criteria and dimensions could be extended and refined, and no doubt much relevant information could be collected that would speak to the issue of gender inequality, the "position" of women, and even "hierarchical" rankings. There is, however, the danger that such a laundry list might not reveal the truly important contours of specific societies—their relevant foci and centers of gravity—with regard to the issue of the relations between the genders and sexes.

Ideally I would recommend a different exegetical and comparative approach constructed from "within the tradition," so to say, which illuminates the existential emphases, preoccupations, and dilemmas around which the society or culture in question has constructed its form of life along the axis of male and female valuations. The deployment of this perhaps more imaginative method should lead not to a mindless relativism but to the construction of profiles of societies that should in principle be comparable in terms of their characteristic contours, emphases, and designs. The ethnographies at hand on Africa and India do not, however, permit the construction of complete profiles from within the tradition, and therefore, taking into account my limitations as well as those of the literature, I shall attempt a more modest task. Taking some examples from Sub-Saharan Africa and from North India, I shall try to demonstrate the difficulties of comparison in terms of even basic anthropological concepts such as marriage, family, household, bridewealth, and dowry. Two prominent difficulties posed by translation and comparison are inversions of each other. On the one hand, there are the difficulties of adequately grasping the details of a local custom, practice, or institution and then giving it a label in the English language. This is a problem of translating, labelling, and assimilating the "alien" phenomenon to our anthropological categories of understanding. On the other hand, there is the problem of taking the analytic adequacy of an anthropological concept for granted and then finding that it does not fit and grasp meaningfully the empirical details on the ground. Both difficulties surfaced in the colonial encounter between Western imperial powers and subjugated indigenous societies and are reflected in the writings of administrators, missionaries, and anthropologists.

I shall begin by dealing with problems of translation and fit with regard to a limited number of contexts and activities that have something to do with the position of women vis-à-vis men in certain parts of Africa and India and use the results as a way of positively illuminating the differences in emphasis in the two regions with re-

gard to the conception, valuation, and structuring of some aspects of female-male status and roles. That attempt will be carried farther along the road by a reevaluation of a comparative thesis propounded in 1973 by Jack Goody and myself on bridewealth and dowry.

The Position of Women: Problems of Translation

As we consider the shocked pronouncements of British colonial administrators and fellow travellers on encountering some of the alleged "barbarous" customs and usages of Africa or India, the unexpected but relevant question arises whether the "prejudices" and "distortions" of the British in their encounter and clash with African or Indian customs were an entirely one-sided illusion. Will a corrective change of the telescopic lens highlight African and Indian preoccupations in their own contextual terms? The British difficulties with India did arise from a clash of cultures and therefore were in a sense a reaction, albeit a tendentious one, to native problems and preoccupations. It is possible that both sides dialectically constructed and negotiated a colonial reality shot through with different emphases, interpretations, and misinterpretations.

For example, in the pages of *Man* for 1929–31 a debate raged among British colonial servants and anthropologists concerned with Africa as to the proper labelling and glossing of transactions such as *lobola*, which consisted of material payments from the bridegroom's family to the bride's family. Torday expressed the fear that a certain Member of Parliament, Mr. Pagett, who after flying visits to Africa concluded that Africans "traffic in daughters," might make the wrong laws for the colonies. Declaring that it was absurd to call the transaction "bride-price," Torday preferred the label "earnest" to signify the sealing of a contract binding on the two parties to the marriage. Radcliffe-Brown (1929) disagreed with Torday and advanced his juridical thesis that the payment of cattle for a wife be considered "an indemnity" or payment of compensation to a group (family or clan) that loses a member. Driberg (1929) accused Raglan of the view that "a girl is knocked down to the highest bidder in the marriage market" and maintained that women were not bartered away in Africa in communal transactions. Raglan (1929), denying such a crude view of the matter, nevertheless stuck to his view that the payment of a bride-price had no religious or ritual significance and was "essentially a transaction of a commercial nature." Young (1930) then proposed that the proper translation might be "marriage settlement," which helped to preserve an equilibrium between the parties. Finally, Evans-Pritchard (1931), pointing out that the transaction had not merely economic but also social implications, contributed the neutral word "bride-wealth," which in fact became the regular usage. Like the question of "race," the question of "bride-price" perplexed the liberal conscience of anthropologists, for issues of "inequality," "domination," "prejudice," and

"male chauvinism" lurked behind the technical issue of translation.

Traditional African sayings such as the Zulu expression "Cattle beget children" and the assertion by Gusii women "We are bought like cattle" did not help much in choosing between "bride-price" and "bridewealth." Indeed, the same debate was resurrected in the '60s, with Gray (1960) stridently arguing that the Sonjo payment of goats for a wife (with goats also figuring as a medium of payment in other transactions as well) amounted to a commercial transaction that should appropriately be seen as bride purchase. This assertion predictably baited the substantivist Dalton (1966), who (earnestly) explained why such transactions, by virtue of not belonging to "market" relations, could not be described as "commercial." Gulliver (1961) threw a spanner into the works when he with sweet reasonableness explained that bridewealth payments had many functions and that they moreover manifested great variability even among African societies. His particularistic thesis put at risk any simplistic comparative study of marriage payments.

But the translation issue—whether the correct gloss for the African phenomenon is bride-price or bride-wealth—in fact pointed to the larger substantive truth that the value attached to women on account of their progeny in Sub-Saharan Africa was *significantly different* from the valuation given the same phenomenon among the upper castes and classes of (North) India. Thus Gough (1971:111) declared confidently, "It is the fertility of the woman which a [Nuer] lineage receives by payment of bridewealth." As is well known, agnatic descent is by a kind of paradox traced through the mother, for "the rule is that in virtue of payment of bride-wealth all who are born of her womb are children of her husband and therefore paternal kin, by whomsoever they may have been begotten." Invoking the juridical language of transfer of rights at marriages popularized by Africanists such as Fortes (1962)—rights *in uxorem* (sexual rights), rights *in genetricem* (rights in a woman's procreative capacities), rights over a woman's domestic services, and so on—Gough ventured a remark that has profound significance for a comparison of, say, patrilineal systems in Africa south of the Sahara and those among the upper castes of North India (especially the Brahmins and Rajputs). The Nuer system, she argued (p. 111), is

one which, by separating the rights in a woman as sexual partner and domestic worker from the rights in her as genetrix, affords a certain *personal autonomy* [emphasis added] to women while retaining, at least in theory, the legal principle of descent. This feature is apparently widespread among the non-Muslim patrilineal peoples of Africa, but perhaps not commonly found elsewhere. . . . In general, . . . systems which permit the separation of rights *in uxorem* and *in genetricem* are radically different from various patrilineal kinship systems which are also what we may call patriarchal, in which a woman is legally subordinate to one man, or to one at a time, who controls at once the sexual, procreative, and domestic

rights in her. The Brahmins of India exemplify such a system. Here, unless he is born in adultery (when, if detected, both wife and child are expelled from the community), a man's legal son is always his natural son or else one he has, as an individual, legally adopted from among his agnatic kin. In this system, therefore, agnatic descent is traced through the father and not through the mother, for women are merely the procreative instruments of their husbands, and after death their names are forgotten.

Gough continues (p. 112):

There is a second sense in which, among the Nuer, agnatic descent is traced through women. This comes from the fact that marriage is ideally, although it seems not very often in fact, polygynous. Collateral aristocratic lineages of varying depth are therefore frequently thought to have stemmed from paternal half-brothers, and each then traces its descent to the mother from whom it sprang. Such systems, also widespread in Africa, again contrast with that of the Brahmins, among whom polygyny is forbidden unless the first wife is barren, and among whom mothers do not therefore create points of fission within the agnatic lineage.

In this comparative statement Gough is saying that the focus of interest of most African patrilineal systems is the reproductive capacity of a woman and the maximum number of children she will bear; that African polygyny and matrifiliation are part of a special kind of patrilineal configuration; and that because a married woman's sexuality itself is not curbed and because her children's kinship affiliation is never in doubt, the African woman enjoys greater personal autonomy than the high-caste Indian wife. The Indian preoccupations, on the other hand, are with controlling a wife's sexuality as well, and her adultery or sexuality outside of wedlock has serious consequences for the placement of children and the "purity" of caste status. In India, then, the "patriarchal" subordination of women is greater than in Africa.

Examining woman's role in economic development, Boserup (1970) suggested that generally women in rural communities fall into two broad groups. Africa south of the Sahara is the locale of "female farming systems" par excellence (a formulation that was later to be modified or refined but not negated by Africanists such as Guyer [1984]).² Such systems are "found in regions where shift-

2. Guyer successfully challenges the "naturalist premise" that African women's hoe-farming techniques and cultivation of food crops, especially root crops, are directly determined by women's child care and domestic duties. She further persuasively argues that male-female differences in cropping systems and in capabilities for labor mobilization are more a reflection of the power structure in the politico-social domain than of constraints stemming from an autonomous domestic domain. Neither of these submissions affects my thesis. Guyer also presents certain West African examples in which men and women have participated in the production of food crops and cereals, but these exceptions do not disprove the general pattern that in most of West Africa and East Africa—the Bantu belt—women are the primary food producers and hoe farming is the usual technique.

ing cultivation predominates, and the major part of agricultural work is done by women. In such communities we can expect to find a high incidence of polygamy, and bridewealth being paid by the future husband or his family. The women are hardworking and have only a *limited right of support from their husbands and some economic independence from the sale of their own crops*" (p. 50, emphasis added).³ The second type of woman's position predominates in regions "influenced by Arab, Hindu and Chinese culture," and from my point of view upper-caste rural India would fit eminently.⁴ This type "is found where plough cultivation predominates and where women do less agricultural work than men. In such communities we may expect to find: that only a tiny minority of marriages, if any, are polygamous; that a dowry is usually paid by the girl's family; that a wife is *entirely dependent upon her husband for economic support; and that the husband has an obligation to support his wife and children, at least as long as the marriage is in force*" (p. 50, emphasis added). Boserup elaborated on this thesis as follows (p. 48): Among tribal and low-caste peoples in India, women work; "by contrast in the Hindu communities, women are less active in agriculture, and instead of a brideprice being paid by the bridegroom, a dowry has to be paid by the bride's family. A dowry paid by the girl's family is a means of securing for her a good position in her husband's family."

Resorting to the orthodox economists' jargon, one might say that for both Gough and Boserup the brideprice or bridewealth in Sub-Saharan Africa is apparently tantamount to the discounted value of part or all of the bride's share of a marriage output; Gough emphasizes a woman's output in terms of producing children, Boserup in terms of her agricultural work. Gough attributes to her greater sexual autonomy (even outside marriage), while Boserup emphasizes her greater economic autonomy and her control of funds accruing to her from the sale of crops from her fields. Polygyny in the one perspective makes possible a plenitude of children for the patrilineage; in the other it makes possible greater agricultural output from the women's fields on behalf of the entire compound or "house-property complex" (so labelled by Gluckman [1950] and his associates) in the formal charge of the male head. Indian wives on these counts are victims of patriarchal domination, economically less productive and therefore more dependent. But the question of the "economic security" of the African and Indian female counterparts may involve other measures and considerations that complicate any simple judgment.

3. Moodie (quoted by Wilson 1981:134), writing around 1838–41, said of the Xhosa of South Africa, "Women perform all the hard work, such as digging, delving, thrashing, and making the huts, besides cooking and dressing victuals; while men do nothing but milk the cows and make the 'kraals'."

4. Boserup's profile of the Hindu woman is, as she herself was aware, not applicable to the bulk of the lower strata, castes, and nonpropertied agricultural laboring segments of the Indian population, among which women are active in agricultural and certain kinds of craft work and marriage is contracted with the payment of bride-price.

For example, the greater "autonomy" and "freedom" enjoyed by the African rural adult woman as regards control over her separate income and over her sexuality are undermined by her frequently inferior rights with respect to the inheritance and control of land and herds. Where shifting agriculture has prevailed, rights of control over the land and its periodic allocation to the cultivating units have usually been exercised by males (belonging to different levels of the lineage and clan). In situations where pastoralism and agriculture are combined, as in many parts of East and South Africa (e.g., the Southern Bantu), and where polygyny and the house-property complex occur together, women as wives and mothers of individual "house" segments do not control the allocation of land-use rights and of cattle to their respective "houses" (see Kuper 1982). Where, owing to population density, certain kinds of homestead lands have been treated as heritable property, and in modern times, when "permanent" cash crops like cocoa or tea have transformed the land on which they grow into patrimonial properties capable of being owned and transferred by owners by sale or inheritance, there too men have usually exercised the rights of ownership and excluded women (even where so-called matrilineal systems of kinship have prevailed). By contrast, in upper-caste North India there were certain conditions under which a woman could inherit or be the vehicle for transmitting property over the generations. Again, precisely because the Indian woman is incorporated into her husband's household and joint family, she enjoys greater economic security than her African counterpart when she becomes a widow. We shall take up these issues again later.

The loudest condemnations of the British colonial administrators and missionaries were directed at the practice of *sati* or *suttee* (widows' burning themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands), at the so-called infant marriage (or marriage of a girl before puberty), at "female infanticide," especially among the so-called martial castes, and finally at the extortionate "dowry" system and profligate marriage expenses that ruined many a hardworking peasant family. This set of "misguided" practices was further compounded by Hindu preoccupations with caste status and purity and with the chastity of women, who had to be protected and provided with superior-status husbands. Cave-Browne (1857, quoted by Parry 1979:214) described these preoccupations in the following manner: "To marry an inferior is, in their eyes, a degradation; but to remain unmarried is actual dishonour. Not believing in the existence of female virtue, they regard marriage as woman's only safeguard against shame and infamy. Thus a daughter becomes, from the very first, a source of great anxiety. . . . He [the father] cannot allow her to pass even the early years of her childhood unbetrothed, or to attain the first stage of puberty unmarried, without incurring the risk of grievous dishonour." Cave-Browne pointed out how the Rajput aristocrats resolved their dilemmas by resorting to female infanticide, and he seized on the exorbitant dowries demanded at the marriage of a girl as its major cause.

The issue of excessive dowry also stimulated attempts of British administrators to reform the marriage rules by enlarging the marriage circles (the greater the number of eligible partners the greater the likelihood of smaller dowries) and by encouraging the exchange of women on a symmetrical basis. As Parry reports (p. 217), in mid-19th-century Kangra especially, female infanticide seemed firmly entrenched, and "the destruction of daughters at the top of the hierarchy created something very like a market in women at the bottom."

The tradition, then, of focussing on female infanticide and blaming it on hypergamous practices and costly dowries is well established from British times and has been taken up by many recent ethnographers.⁵ The facts and the interpretation cannot be disputed and are carried to their bitter conclusion in the essays of Barbara Miller. Miller (1980) establishes that although female infanticide has greatly decreased since its legal abolition by the British in 1870, there has "occurred a simultaneous increase in the equally invidious practice of systematic fatal neglect of female offspring," especially in North India (p. 95). She confirms that this phenomenon, which correlates with higher mortality rates for young female offspring than for males, is to be associated with the northern practice of systematic hypergamy among the propertied segments and the accompanying burden of escalating dowries and high marriage expenses borne by the bride givers. "Marriage costs," she concludes, "help us to understand a large part of the problem of daughter neglect and son preference in rural India" (p. 126). In another paper Miller (1984) establishes the preference for sons as a key determinant in sex-selective death among children in North India.

There is no doubt that the prestigious Brahmanical and upper-caste ideological formulation of *kanyādāna* (the gift of a virgin) carries a double message of positive and negative valuations. From Kashmir to Tamil Nāṭu among Brahmins and "Sanskritized" castes, the prestigious *śāstric* conception of *kanyādāna* is colored by the theory of exchange of gifts, especially the conception of the religious gift (*dharma dāna*). There are many authorities on this, but Trautmann's (1981:26–27) exposition is representative:

The *śāstric* ideal of marriage as the gift of a maiden . . . begins by presuming the superiority of the groom's people vis-à-vis the bride's. It continues by injecting into the marriage ceremony a ritual gift, whereby the bride is given by her guardian (in principle, her father) into the groom's keeping . . . transforming her into an extension of the groom and his family. Thus marriage by gift is also a rite of *initiation* (into another family) for the woman, and a sacrament that creates an indissoluble bond between

husband and wife, rendering divorce and widow remarriage impossible. . . . Women born within the lineage (*gotrajā*, *kulajā*) become "women given away" (*prattā*) upon marriage, a class whose counterpart is the "brides of the lineage" (*kula-vadhu*). Finally, *kanyādāna* ends by perpetuating the asymmetry between the two parties to the transaction, for after marriage hospitality, gifts and deference must flow always and only from the bride's people to the groom's. . . . Givers must not be takers in transcendental commerce; and we may add that takers being by definition the superior of givers, the *kanyādāna* complex carries with it a tendency to "hypergamy."

But it has to be admitted that there is a darker side to the Indian valuation of women. A diversity of Indian sources, Vedic chants, Dharmaśāstric texts, ritual incantations, folksongs (including those sung by women among their own circle at weddings), and tales reiterate a basic ambivalence and simultaneously encode both the positive and negative propensities of women and women's own unvarnished recognition of their subordination.

The *kanyādāna* conception itself intimates the burden of sin, impurity, and inauspiciousness that surrounds a woman who at the same time is the vehicle of fertility and prosperity in marriage. Every time an unmarried daughter menstruates the father bears the sin of "killing" or aborting prospective human lives. And, as Gough (1956:841) puts it, "the gift of a virgin daughter is said to shrieve her father of the sin of begetting and transfer it to his son-in-law. For this reason it is said that to marry a girl is an act of benevolence toward her father. It is performed with ostentatious condescension, and today requires that the bride's father make a heavy cash payment to the bridegroom and meet all the expenses of an elaborate ceremony." Thus the material gifts at marriage as well as the bride herself have to do the double duty of relieving her parents of sin and inauspicious taints and at the same time effecting an auspicious conjugal union with its attendant fruits. Similarly, the groom and his kin, while accepting the "gift" of a woman (and the material prestations accompanying her) as advantaged superiors, also absorb the dangers, pollutions, and impurities that are carried by them.

There are many recordings of the ambivalence associated with the woman—as daughter, wife, mother, widow, and so on—in Indian culture. Kakar (1978: chap. 3) gives us a convenient composite account of the Indian woman's identity as defined by her relationship to others in these phases of her life. Especially noteworthy for our purposes are the diverse manifestations of the "cultural devaluation of girls," the possible psychological consequences of female "self-depreciation," the protective response of "culturally sanctioned maternal indulgence of daughters," and the "underground" of female culture, as reflected in ballads, wedding songs and jokes" by which women "react against the discrimination of their culture by portraying men as vain, faith-

5. Aside from Parry, Hershman (1981:157) asserts that in the past it was customary in Punjabi families to keep only the first and kill subsequent female children. "Female infanticide was clearly a practice connected with the system of dowry and marriage expenses in which it was the bride's side who was to bear the greatest burden of the cost."

less and infantile.”⁶ (It is unclear to me whether these last are context-restricted “rituals of rebellion” that leave the dominant male ideology more or less intact or genuine countercultural expressions and enactments that question and oppose that ideology.)

It is clear that late-19th-century British colonial concern with the female infanticide, ruinous dowries, and ballooning hypergamous ambitions of high-caste propertied North India has been reinforced by the recent comparative and analytical comments of scholars such as Boserup and Gough, which picture Indian rural women as sexually and economically less autonomous and more subordinated than their African counterparts. These judgments, together with Miller’s theme that a North Indian female child is more subject to neglect (and infanticide) than her male siblings, do cumulatively type the Indian woman as subject to grave disadvantages. Current bride burnings in India attributed to expectations and demands concerning dowry payments are in line with those tendencies but are in my view an intensified modern pathology erupting under conditions of urbanism, migration, investment in the education of males, who find urban nonagricultural employment, and so on.

While bearing in mind these negative judgments and their consequences, let me now focus on other aspects of the valuation and position of women in India which amount to a more “positive” account constructed from “within” the dominant Indian ideological formulations and their translation into practices.

First of all, there are the notions of purity, auspiciousness, and divinity that attach to the status of virgin and that form an essential part of the concept of *kanyādāna*. Hershman (1981:157–58), for example, reports in regard to contemporary rural Punjab that “on ritual occasions an unmarried girl is worshipped as *kanyā dēvi* (the virgin goddess) and adults touch her feet and make offerings to her.” Rather than being called upon in her own natal family to touch the feet of all elders in ritual deference as her brothers are expected to do, “it is others who honour and respect the unmarried woman because she is a virgin and therefore deemed to be ritually pure.” Indeed, the ideology of both Hindu and Sikh marriage is that *kanyādāna* earns good *karma* (spiritual benefit), because the gift of a virgin must be made in the spirit of perfect unselfishness. “Thus ‘the gift of a virgin’ along with a lavish dowry, and the continual process of gift-giving to the sister, her husband and her children, are all acts of *sagan* (auspicious ritual) which gain spiritual benefit. Furthermore, among Brahmans,” continues Hershman (pp. 209–10), “the daughter’s son is frequently employed as the family *purohit* (priest) and thus at the ceremony of *solān* which is celebrated following the death of his mother’s brother, the daughter’s son is commonly the ritual recipient of the charity given

in the dead man’s name.” It seems to me that part of the same complex of the virgin daughter’s marriage as an auspicious occasion is the preference shown, for example, by the more affluent of the Kanya-Kubja Brahmans of North India, among whom hypergamy and hierarchical ranking are both inordinately developed, for costly hypergamous marriage on the grounds that it is prestigious for a father to “secure his daughter’s comfort” and simultaneously to effect an “elite alliance” as a crucial means for the social advancement of his family (Khare 1972). Thus this capacity of the bride, who is transferred upwards together with dowry prestations, for raising the *giver’s* status is an attribution of transforming agency and potency to the female. As Khare puts it, somewhat mundanely, among the Kanya Kubja “wealth when offered in the form of a big dowry ‘buys’ higher *biswa* rank [a coveted socioeconomic rating/class status within the caste] because it is women who by transferring ‘up’ demonstrate that their natal families are not lower than their affines.” Indeed, since marriage is for the Kanya Kubjas “the surest means of rising or falling on the *biswa* scale,” it seems to me that in any comparative evaluation of the role of the North Indian high-caste woman her transforming capacity for the benefit of the giver, coded in the expression “gift of a virgin” as a meritorious as well as a merit-producing act, has to be appreciated in its “positive” aspect. It has to be given its right marking and weighting in the larger complex of features upon which conventional analysis has typically concentrated, namely, the inferiority of the giver vis-à-vis the taker in hypergamous marriage, the strains caused by escalating dowries, and the burdens placed on the bride’s family.⁷

Other “positive” aspects of the Indian conception of marriage are the paired unity constituted by husband and wife and the values attached to the capacities of a woman as wife. Blunt (1931:63–80) highlighted the following features of marriage in strict high-caste Hindu circles:

Marriage is a religious rite. Its effects on women are indelible; hence no woman can undergo it more than once, and strict Hindus debar widows from contracting a second union. (Sir Richard Burn in 1901 estimated, reports Blunt, that “the prohibition was observed by the Brahmans and allied castes, the Rajputs and allied castes, the Vaisya castes of good standing, and certain other castes trying to rise in the social scale. . . .”)

Unlike that in the West, marriage among the Hindus is “so universal that the only classes who remain unwed are faqirs and other celibates who do not want to marry,

6. Kakar also calls our attention to the higher rate of infant mortality in India and remarks, “Whatever health care and schooling are available in India daughters are the last to receive it” (p. 57).

7. West Bengal and Orissa are strictly speaking outside “North India” but also provide illuminating evidence on the association of ideas of purity and auspiciousness with women (see Frusetti 1982 and Marglin 1985). The same association of ideas prevails among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, among whom, however, as Norbert Peabody has indicated in a personal communication, hypergamous marriage may not be so well developed as among the Brahmans. The claim that all Rajput clans are equal counterbalances the ideology of hypergamy.

and men who cannot find wives owing to the shortage of women, which in the United Provinces is considerable (915 women to 1,000 men in 1911)."

"In theory polygamy is legal for all Hindus, but in practice it is uncommon." Monogamy is the usual form, and "Hindus of the better class rarely contract a second union in the lifetime of the first wife, save in exceptional circumstances, such as the first wife's barrenness or her failure to bear a son." "Hindu law [by which is meant principally the code of Manu] does not permit divorce, and it is unknown amongst castes of respectable standing." In orthodox circles, girls may even be given in "infant marriage," a custom which is explained by local theorists on several grounds.

Finally, under the heading "Marriage by Purchase," Blunt cites Manu as "forbidding" the payment of bride-price, a practice which, however, is found only among low castes. "The bridegroom price takes the form of a dowry with the bride and is usual among the better classes. It is, partly at all events, the result of hypergamy. . . . Normally, however, dowries in the United Provinces are not excessive, though extravagant enough; the marriage ceremonies, however, eat up a great deal of money."⁸

The orthodox Hindu view is that ideally a union should be monogamous and that marriage permanently unites a woman to her husband, making it impossible for her to remarry or seek divorce. These strictures are matched by the Hindu view that ordinarily all men and women ought to enter the married and householding state and that it is a felicitous and complementary *union* of male and female that produces outcomes in which the contribution of women is critical. In the Hindu formulation certain elaborate affirmations are made about the occasion of marriage as an auspicious rite of passage, about the felicitous coupling achieved in the marital state and the conjugal bond, that have no parallel in the reported formulations surrounding marriage and husband-wife relations in West and East Africa.

Marriage in India is a highly auspicious (and pure) occasion which in turn generates fertility and productivity. The bride and bridegroom are temporarily elevated to the status of divinities, both paired and conjoined. In this pairing it would seem that while it is the woman who is most transformed and incorporated into the husband's joint-family and lineage, it is also the case that it is she who transports into marriage the energies and potencies of prosperity and wealth in the form of Lakshmi.⁹ On the other hand, the wife is said to be so transformed by marriage that she becomes part of the husband's *gotra* and adopts the same kinship terms that he uses for his own kin; she tends the domestic fire in her husband's house and together with him participates in

the rites to his patrilineal ancestors, lineage deities, and so on. Correspondingly, a married woman, as daughter of her own patrilineage, is usually prohibited from making offerings at shrines of her natal village or clan—that is, to her father's patrilineal ancestors.¹⁰ When she returns periodically to her natal village it is as "daughter of the village," and in this capacity she brings auspiciousness to her brothers and takes back affinal gifts.¹¹

Bridewealth and Dowry: Sub-Saharan Africa and North India Compared

All this has really been a build-up to what seems to me to be one of the major structural and ideological differences between Sub-Saharan Africa and North India in the manner in which women are implicated in the web of life. To explicate this point I shall return to the comparative thesis that Goody and I proposed in *Bridewealth and Dowry* in 1973, since which time much good ethnography has been written that permits its correction and refinement. This is not the place to criticize Goody's contrast of two grand units—Africa (south of the Sahara) and Eurasia—first in *Bridewealth and Dowry* and then in his *Production and Reproduction*, his seemingly causal use of path analysis, or his gross attribution to plough agriculture and hoe agriculture of the differences in family, property, and stratification systems in Eurasia and Africa. (I intend to write a separate constructive critique of Goody's continental comparisons.) It is, however, the place to take up the comparison between bridewealth and dowry as originally formulated by both of us and to review its adequacy with regard to Sub-Saharan West, East, and South Africa, on the one hand, and propertied high-caste Hindu North India, on the other.

The original comparison went as follows: In Africa property transmission is sex-linked or homogeneous (male to male, female to female), with by far the major resources, both land and other assets, being transmitted between males. In India there is bilateral transmission, or, as Goody called it, diverging devolution, by which parental property devolves vertically on both sexes. Dowry in India is a form of premortem inheritance for a woman, and she takes it with her into marriage to form a conjugal fund. Bridewealth in Africa, which passes from the bridegroom's side to the bride's male kin, is a circulating fund that enables the latter to secure their own wives. Goody put the crucial comparison this way (p. 17):

Bridewealth passes from the kin of the groom to those of the bride; it forms a societal fund, a circu-

8. Blunt reports (p. 71), "The Aheriya, Audhiya, Baiswar, Basor, Bhat, Bhatiya, Bind, Dangi, Golapura, Gujar, Jat, Kachchi, Kayatha, Khanga, Kurmi, Lodga, Pasi, Sadh, Sejwari and Sonar, with most Brahman and Rajput clans, have the custom of bridegroom price or dowry."

9. For similar ideas in Bengal see Fruzetti (1982).

10. In Punjab, as reported by Hershman (1981), this is so except when a widowed or divorced woman returns to live in her natal village and has no brothers to propitiate the spirits of her dead parents at the annual *sraddha* ceremony.

11. Concerning the festivities marking brother-sister relations, especially as regards out-married women returning to their natal villages, in Kishan Garhi, Uttar Pradesh, see Marriott (1955).

lating pool of resources, the movement of which corresponds to the movement of rights over spouses, usually women. But dowry is part of a familial or conjugal fund, which passes down from holder to heir, and usually from the parents to the daughter. . . . Consequently dowry belongs to a type of transmission I have called “diverging devolution.”

Now, it is clear that the propositions that dowry in North India (a) is a kind of premortem inheritance for women and (b) forms part of the conjugal fund of the marrying couple have to be modified in the face of recent ethnography such as that provided by Vatuk (1975), Parry (1979), van der Veen (1972), Hershman (1981), and others. The concept of premortem inheritance insofar as it minimally suggests that all daughters in a family should receive “equal shares” vis-à-vis one another is contradicted by the fact that the dowries given could vary between sisters, their values being linked to the status of the bridegroom and other “hypergamous” considerations and modern educational attainments. Even more important, the notion of a woman’s dowry’s being her property and going to constitute a “conjugal fund” is put in serious question. Vatuk reports that the marriage prestations among the Gaur Brahmins of Uttar Pradesh consist of many named categories. The principal one with which we are concerned is the *dān dahej*, the series of gifts “presented by the household or agnatic extended family of the bride to her and to her prospective groom and his kinsmen.”¹² It seems that these gifts fall into three broad classes: (1) a fairly substantial portion consisting of the clothing and jewelry which the bride retains as her personal property (which in the Tambiah-Goody thesis could be merged in the conjugal fund); (2) household furnishings, cooking and eating vessels, and prestige goods, which become the property of the groom’s *joint family* and may be used by his parents in the future marriages of their daughters (that is, in the language of Goody, serve as a circulating fund); and (3) gifts of clothing to women in the groom’s family and to his married sisters, father’s sisters, and so on).

Vatuk’s statement goes as follows (pp. 165–66):

The wedding gifts, with the exception of those items explicitly designed for the bride’s personal use or for that of her husband-to-be, become the property of the

groom’s joint household and their disposal is, in effect, in the hands of his parents or of the household head and his wife. This includes the cash gifts to the groom before the wedding, the household furnishings and utensils, and the clothing. Unless her parents-in-law are very wealthy, it is expected that many of the goods which the bride “brings” to her conjugal household (which normally she and her husband will join in virilocal residence) will be given away at the marriages of her husband’s sisters. The brassware and clothing will in part be stored away for future gift-giving obligations.

Nowadays, in the case of young village men in urban employment wishing to set up neolocal residence soon after marriage, their parents may, if they wish, give the couple some or all of the goods brought by the *dahej* to help them do so. “But the decision is one for [the parents] to make; to take her *dahej* goods is not the bride’s right.” In contrast, “the jewellery given the bride by parents or other natal kin, and the clothing designated for her in *dahej*, as well as any cash gifts given her then or subsequently by her natal relatives or friends, do become the property of the bride, and she may keep these things, separate from the belongings of the household at large, in her own wardrobe trunk, which is a standard item given by her family at *gauna*.”

In sum, then, we may say that a range of affinal prestations passes between the two sides before the wedding and during it. *Dān dahej*, the dowry proper, given during the wedding, is the largest portion and flows from the bride’s side: a substantial portion of it is at the disposal of the joint family of the groom, while another portion is reserved for the bride as her personal property.

Hershman (1981:211) gives a largely parallel account for rural Punjabi Brahman and Jat households: “In Punjab the total dowry is called *dāj* (*dahez*) or *katt* but analytically it contains two distinct elements: firstly household goods which are given with the intention of their forming the nucleus of a married daughter’s household goods after the joint family is divided; and secondly there are affinal prestations made to the groom, his parents and his various kin.” He reiterates in another place: “There are two distinct elements in the dowry: the trousseau and the personal possessions of the bride; and the affinal gifts made by wife-givers to wife-receivers” (p. 213). The bride “commonly retains her own locked trunk within the joint household and it is the possessions kept in it that are expected to form the nucleus of her household equipment when she sets up her own home” (pp. 213–14).¹³ Hershman confirms Vatuk’s points that the gifts of clothing and ornaments made by

12. In addition to the *dān dahej*, there is *mūh dikhāi*, a category of gifts given by the male agnates of the groom’s family (or their wives), by their neighbors and friends, by the groom’s father’s sisters and their husbands, and so on, ostensibly for the use of the groom’s joint family (which his bride will join). It seems that most of these gifts are “reversible” and are reciprocated in time when there are weddings at the donors’ houses. The bride is usually allowed to keep a small portion of the *mūh dikhāi* that she may directly receive. Other, less significant categories include *bhāt*, gifts given by the mother’s brother to the groom (sister’s son) and to the bride (sister’s daughter), the latter usually merged with the *dān dahej*, and *neg*, minor prestations made by the male heads of the groom’s family and bride’s family to their respective married sisters and married daughters and father’s sisters for ritual services they have rendered. (These are, of course, women of the family given in marriage to wife takers.)

13. Hershman says of the contributors of the *dāj* (p. 211), “The greatest portion of the dowry is raised by the bride’s father and brothers from their savings, but traditionally a significant contribution towards the expenses were collected from the bride’s father’s *barādāri* through the institution of *nindā*. The portion of the dowry given by the mother’s brother is known as *nānki shak* and it is displayed separately from the rest of the dowry. The *nānki shak* must minimally contain the clothing in which the sister’s daughter goes through the marriage ceremony.”

the groom and his father to the bride at the time of marriage are often "only for show, particularly the gold ornaments, and they are returned immediately on the completion of the marriage rituals." Indeed, the greater part of the property brought by the wife is under the control of the head of the groom's family, his mother, and available for use by his sisters. The cash is controlled by his father, the household furnishings, such as pots, cots, and mattresses, are used by the joint family, and even the gold ornaments and embroidered clothes may be passed on to his sister and sister's daughter. The bride controls only the property locked away in her own chest (*paṭī*).

Parry (1979) more or less confirms these categories of marriage prestations originating from the bride's side for the Rajputs of Chadhiar in the Kangra Hills. The cash value of a woman's dowry in the late '60s averaged Rs 3,000–4,000 with a maximum of Rs 12,000, and it may be viewed as part of her moral claim to be provided with wealth "in lieu of the rights of maintenance she renounces at marriage." "One part of the dowry—a gift known as *bagge* consisting of one or more tin trunks containing clothes and some ornaments for the women of the groom's immediate *khandan* and close female kin of other lineages—is purely an affinal prestation which does not become part of the bride's conjugal estate. Nor does the trousseau of the bride herself, to which the groom's side also makes a substantial contribution in the form of ornaments, clothes and cosmetics (collectively *barasui*)" (pp. 239–40). Parry also reports (p. 239)—a point that Hershman confirms and that is in line with what I had myself mentioned in my 1968 essay¹⁴—that there is "some ambivalence about whether the dowry she brings may be used to subsidize that of her husband's sister, though in practice this is often discreetly done."

The Anavil Brahmins of South Gujarat represent both in their geographical location in western India in the Surat District, about 100 miles north of Bombay, and in their marriage institutions somewhat of a periphery to the North Indian heartlands and constitute only 5% of the population of the district. Yet the upper segments of this caste, high in caste purity and in economic well-being (they are affluent landowners), are described by van der Veen (1971) as influenced by "brahmanical" values, "especially in the matter of making conspicuous dowry payments." Although Anavil Brahmin marriages are aware of three modalities—dowry, bride-price, and symmetrical exchange—the dowry form is the most prestigious among the Desai, who emphasize patrilineal, patrilocal, and joint-family values, together with the se-

clusion of women and the ritual superiority of the "wife takers." The Desai do not emphasize hypergamous marriage (only a few practice it) and prefer marriage of equals. This, I suggest, is in line with their elite status and their small numbers and spatial confinement. Yet the components of their prestigious dowry payments and their destinations echo the North Indian patterns I have described. In the whole array of marriage gifts between the bride's and the bridegroom's side, the components that seem most prominent are the *gharena*, the jewelry and other personal belongings that the bride takes with her (p. 37), and the more costly *dhardaman*, literally "house money" but including household effects, which is meant not for the young couple but for the bridegroom's family. (It is called *vankado* among the Desai and sometimes glossed as "bridegroom money.") Van der Veen explains that "the bridegroom-money, *vankado*, and also the domestic utensils are not meant for the groom himself or even for the young couple" and that this is consonant with the fact that the bride and groom are representatives of two different kinship groups and marriage was traditionally seen as a relationship between such groups. In other words, traditionally conjugal union was subordinated to and merged in the large joint family.¹⁵ But it seems that in recent times, with higher education available to both sexes and urban living or living away from the rural joint family a fact of life, young couples are given the freedom to set up their own households, and the *vankado* becomes increasingly the conjugal assets of the new couple alone. Such trends are in line with my arguments in *Bridewealth and Dowry*.¹⁶

Although the proposition that the dowry in North India is primarily meant to form part of the conjugal fund of the marrying couple cannot be sustained in its original form, I want to argue now that this conclusion does

15. Van der Veen says that in modern times, if brides are well educated not only are smaller *vankado* paid but they may be used to buy a house and furniture for the new couple, who may set up independently, or to finance the groom's further education abroad.

16. Although in Bengal marriages do not display the classical pattern of hypergamy, in other respects there is a concordance with the ethnographic facts we have established. According to Fruzetti (p. 31), the gift of a virgin is "the highest form of giving," and dowry is an essential accompaniment of her marriage ("A daughter is rarely given to a line that does not demand dowry, for the size of the dowry reflects the prestige and honour of the line accepting the gift of the virgin"). The "giving of dowry itself is a composite exchange with distinct portions going to the groom, the groom's father, the bride, and the couple of a unit" (p. 30). The wealthiest business and landowning houses in the town of Vishnupur, West Bengal, paid dowries worth Rs 100,000. A father may freely give, in addition to dowry (*pon*), other gifts to his daughter as *dān*. "The cash and other requested items are part of the joint property the bride shares with the rest of the husband's *ghar* [joint family], whereas the jewellery and clothing the bride receives are her own private possessions. The rest of the *dān* (kitchen utensils, clothes) is usually shared by the *ghar* as a whole unless the newly married couple take up separate residence" (p. 40). On the absence of systematic hypergamy, Fruzetti comments (p. 34), "In the Bengali alliance system there are no actual, fixed groups to whom one has to keep giving women or from whom one has to keep taking women; nor is there any fixed pattern of exchanging women in terms of the direction or frequency of marriages."

14. Hershman (1981:246) remarks, "I would, however, agree with Tambiah that the recirculation of dowry such as a woman giving her gold to her husband's sister at the time of her wedding (or having it taken from her) is something considered shameful and performed in *sub rosa* fashion. But there is no doubt that generally almost all the contents of dowries recirculate in this fashion, and clothes such as suits or turbans given as affinal gifts are redeployed at other ritual occasions such as funerals, engagements or further weddings."

not negate the important truth that in North India (as in most of the rest of Hindu India) there is what Dumont has called “double transmission” and what Goody has labelled diverging devolution of property. Both these expressions underscore the implications of the fact that high-caste Hindu women are at marriage invested with or, more correctly, accompanied by transfers of wealth. I want to relate this double passage in the same direction of goods and women in India to two transactional processes and institutional outcomes, which contrast with the processes and outcomes linked with the African passage of bridewealth in a direction opposite to that in which women travel.

In the upper-caste North Indian case, the double transmission of wealth—males inheriting joint-family patrimonial land, dowries in movable wealth being given at the marriage of women—must be read as a necessary duality coexisting synchronically and diachronically. On this matter I can do no better than quote Pocock (1972:101) on the notoriously differentiated and hypergamous Patidars of Gujarat:

The [Patidar] father has two duties: he has to provide for the material future of his sons and for the marriage of his daughters. . . .

Hindu law, as usually understood by Westerners, tends to separate the two duties by laying inevitable emphasis upon the question of inheritance, which relates to the sons only. *But the two reflect upon one another* [emphasis added]; if the family as a masculine, property holding group is affluent, it can afford, is indeed obliged, to create prestigious affinal relations through its girls. Equally the creation of such ties reflects prestige back on the male line. It is not the case that the father provides for his sons *and then* provides for his daughters. He provides for his sons' material future and simultaneously he provides for their social future by creating alliances for them.

Pocock confirms what we know to be a general principle of upper-caste propertied North Indian life—that a father, by investing in a large dowry in the marriage of his daughter with a superior male, not only establishes relations with a family of blood but also raises “the standing of the children in his own family and closely related families in the context of marriages which they would later contract. For the boys larger dowries could be asked while the girls might hope to enter respectable families at less cost” (p. 105).

Pocock again confirms a general North Indian truth when he suggests that “just as the Patidar achieves his social self through marriage, the descent group is similarly defined in relation to affines. Since in a caste society existence is hierarchically qualified, *the descent group defines itself by secessions from inferior agnates* when necessary, as among the *kulin*, and by alliance with affines whose superiority confirms the act of secession” (p. 162).¹⁷

17. Pocock thus amply affirms what I wrote in *Bridewealth and Dowry* (p. 64): “Dowry . . . lends itself to being dressed as a ‘gift’

One must recognize that, in rural North India, the differential control by families of land assets and the hypergamous social ambitions of mobility through affinity effected through dowry payments have two consequences. On the one hand, they work to create internal differentiation and secessions within localized lineages; on the other hand, they allow the creation of alliances and ties between elite groups of approximately similar status (or between groups whose exchange of prestige for wealth closes status gaps) spread over a whole region. The strictures against “repeated marriages” (ensured by the rule that one cannot marry a woman of one’s mother’s brother’s clan, one’s father’s mother’s clan, etc.) and against “reversing” marriages between wife takers and wife givers *ensure both the geographical spread of marriage alliances and the regional dominance of the “dominant caste” strategically distributed throughout the region*. In this way we are able to situate the Indian double transmission of property through males and females in its larger politico-economic context.

Goody’s notion of diverging devolution as a vertical principle over time can with suitable corrections be seen to be a critical diagnostic criterion in the comparison between Sub-Saharan Africa and North India. We have seen that the proper characterization of the marriage payment from the bride’s side—labeled *dān dahej*, *dāj*, and so on—is not that it goes to form the conjugal fund of the new couple (only a small part consisting of personal jewelry and clothes remains with the bride as her nucleus) but that it becomes part of the assets of the *joint family*, to be used for its own collective consumption and for effecting the marriages of its own daughters. Now, the typical joint family in rural propertied circles consists of three generations: the parental couple, its married sons and their spouses, and the latter’s children (plus unmarried daughters and sons). We know from the ethnography that joint families partition at some point in the domestic cycle. While the father and mother are living under the same roof with married sons and their wives *and their growing children*, disputes, tensions, and strains towards subsequent partition of the joint family into the nuclear conjugal families of the sons/brothers come to revolve around issues of the diverging devolution of joint-family property and wealth (see Parry 1979: chap. 6). For example, one brother who has sons and fewer or no daughters chafes at the “good” fortune of the brother with many daughters, for the latter will rely on joint-family assets to dowry his daughters and therefore will want to continue the joint family until this aim is accomplished. Similarly, an older brother who has

that accompanies the ‘gift of a virgin.’ The conception that is ideologically central in India eminently lends itself to hypergamy whereby a family of lower status but not necessarily of inferior wealth attempts to raise its position and its prestige by contracting a superior marriage for its daughters and sisters. Here there is an exchange of status for wealth, and no doubt the dowry-givers can themselves get their return by demanding higher dowries from their own wife-givers.”

seen his daughters marry will fret at the prospect of waiting until his youngest brother's children are married, when he can himself set up his own joint family and look forward to exclusive control over his sons' wives' dowries. In other words, the joint family is to a large degree an aggregate of potential "conjugal estates," so to say, and over time the joint family partitions vertically, with husband-wife pairs and their children dividing up the assets. Thus diverging devolution and the partitioning of the joint family are processually of a piece with the double transmission of property, the fission of patrilineal lineages, and hypergamous alliances that secure the regional dominance of the dominant caste.

When we turn to Sub-Saharan Africa and follow through the implications of bridewealth payments at marriage coupled with virtual male control over the allocation of land used for shifting agriculture and, wherever it pertains, with male transmission to males of landed property, we see quite different implications at the level of domestic groups, unilineal descent groups, and regional political constellations. The sociology of the Indian joint family is different from the sociology of the African house-property complex.

In the best-documented classical reports on African bridewealth transactions, two modalities are emphasized.¹⁸ Evans-Pritchard (1951) stresses that among the Nuer payments were made over a period of time, and the progressive payment was an index of the growing stability of the marriage. A bride-price paid in full was equivalent to a stable marriage. Mayer (1950), on the other hand, reports that tallies of Gusii bridewealth payments were kept in relation to the children born of the union. In the case of divorce there were fine calculations of how much was to be returned: a maximum in an infertile marriage and certain sums subtracted for each child, with practically nothing being repaid if the woman had borne numerous children. I submit that these emphases underscore not only the interest in the wife's procreative capacities and her production of children but also a fragility of marriage that is alien to the North Indian upper-caste context. That the Nuer engaged in valuable bridewealth payments in cattle coexisted with the facts that the divorce rate was high and that 50% of the women were under no one's control with regard to work or residence (Guyer 1981, citing Gough). Of a piece with these features is the extensive fostering of children (Goody 1982).

We can now see better the implications of African polygyny. If the North Indian joint family's backbone was parents, married sons, and their families, in Bantu Africa, in particular, the backbone of the so-called patriarchal compound or the house-property complex was the homestead formally headed by a male elder and divided

into his quarters and the separate huts or "houses" of the several wives and their children, with the wives again separately managing their fields or maintaining their separate stores of grain and income and their sons tending the herds allotted their "houses." Under these circumstances it is inappropriate to view the husband and wives and children as constituting a *single household*, sharing a conjugal farm, working a common farm, or constituting a unitary pool of income or food. This lack of fit is compounded by the high physical mobility of the members (see Guyer 1981). Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, a woman's income tends to be kept separate from her husband's, and there is no common budget between them. For the Ewe of Ghana, it is not meaningful to postulate a single-unit household with regard to expenditure patterns and optimizing welfare. Hill (1963) has definitively documented that West African husbands and wives seldom compose a unified production unit. Ashanti women commonly earn their living and inherit property, and any particular household includes people "who hold important interests in other corporate property and other joint economic ventures" (Guyer 1981:99).

More recent studies in West Africa are trenchant about the limited analytic utility of the concept of "household" when it is taken to mean an independent and unitary production and consumption unit. Goheen (1985), on the basis of her work in Nso, a chiefdom in highland Cameroon, writes wryly, "Most of us who have attempted to study 'the household' in Africa from a classic household economy model have quickly been put straight by our informants about the separation of male/female income, decisions regarding that income, and the fact that male/female responsibilities are more often separate than united."¹⁹ Among the people of Nso women, who are the main farmers, bear the burden of provisioning the household, while men, who spend substantially on their secret societies and fraternal organizations, may pay most school fees and bear the major costs of furniture, zinc roofing, and so on.

Boserup may have exaggerated in labelling African rural economies as "female farming systems." Aside from various Yoruba groups, in which males have traditionally farmed, even among societies in which females were the primary farmers, males have become increasingly involved in farming, especially with the introduction of cash crops. They tend to dominate cash-crop farming, however, and to relegate the raising of food to women. Moreover, the evidence remains strong with regard to the distinctly separate economic efforts of husbands and wives, their separate control of incomes, and their different patterns of expenditures on behalf of their children, with the bulk of the responsibility of feeding and clothing the children still falling on the shoulders of the mothers. Furthermore, interhousehold relations are

18. Among some of the African bridewealth-paying peoples, including the Nuer, there are forms of recognized "marriage" in which bridewealth as such may or may not be paid (Evans-Pritchard called these concubinage), and these instances are not under discussion here.

19. Confirmation of the critique of household economy is provided by Elizabeth Eames's paper for the same panel entitled "'Not under the Same Roof': Ondo Yoruba Wives' Responsibilities in the '80s."

not simply relations between male heads. Women too have their interhousehold exchange networks, and their control of their own independent resources enables them to fulfill obligations to family members and kin living elsewhere.

There are two institutional features that are integrally associated with the profile that makes the sociology of the Indian joint family different from that of the West African polygynous compound or the East African agropastoral house-property complex. The African nexus of bridewealth, multiple wives, and their separate householding produces the phenomenon that Fortes (1953) tirelessly underscored: the patrilineage was internally subdivided by the matrifiliation of the men, and a patrilineage's reproduction was ensured by control of its women's progeny. If the Indian joint family inevitably partitions and the Indian patrilineage inevitably differentiates over time by the logic of diverging devolution in the context of differential control of land resources, the African compound/complex cumulatively populates the patrilineage without causing serious fission on the basis of differences of wealth. This was particularly so in earlier times, when in most parts of Sub-Saharan Africa there was no land shortage and land rights were controlled and allocated at different levels of the lineage system (maximal, medial, minimal, and so on) in diverse ways. While there was no conformity in land tenure arrangements between African societies, by and large—especially before the modern era of extensive cash-cropping—African agrarian systems did not generate sharp economic differentiation within and between localized lineages/villages. *Contra* Meillassoux (1981), we have to hold—whatever the distinctive facts concerning the Guro—that in West Africa there was no generalized domestic or lineage mode of production orchestrated by elders who controlled the marriages of junior males through bridewealth payments that in effect circulated among the elders. Marriages in Sub-Saharan Africa cannot for the most part be fitted into models of alliance or of group exchanges. But, as I have said, the bridewealth payments functioning as circulating funds and allowing the control of women's children effected the reproduction of localized lineage groups (of varying scale). Finally, I think Goody is right to maintain that such systems of open connubium in Africa do not by and large produce classes or strata that develop sharp differences of wealth or styles of life. Even ruling lineages, where they exist, freely give their women to commoners and freely take their wives and concubines from the ruled.

Summation

I began this essay by saying that it is difficult to give analytical precision to such global terms as "gender hierarchy" and "position of women" either within a single society or when comparing societies. One analytical route that some anthropologists might be tempted to take, namely, an externalist construction of profiles made up of measurements on chosen "dimensions,"

may fail to capture the orienting emphases and the true centers of gravity around which different societies construct and live their social lives. As an alternative route I suggested that we might arrive at a better understanding of the "position of women" in rural Sub-Saharan Africa and rural Hindu upper-caste North India by taking as our point of departure the "dialogue" and interaction between the sensibilities and perceptions of British administrators, missionaries, and earlier anthropologists concerning life in their African and Indian colonies and the emphases and concerns that the indigenous African tribesmen and Indian upper-caste folk themselves manifested in their social interactions and ritual festivities. British difficulties and African and Indian preoccupations may have shared a certain space and may open a window to a better grasp of African and Indian forms of life from within their respective traditions.

It soon became apparent that the so-called patrilineal systems of Sub-Saharan Africa and upper-caste North India were quite different totalities. We saw that a "translation problem" revolved around the glossing of the African marriage payments—were they "bride-price" (bride purchase), "bridewealth," or "indemnity," and what light did such African expressions as "Cattle beget children" and "We are bought like cattle" throw on the matter? It became clear that there were grounds for asserting that the African accent was on bridewealth serving to secure all children born to a married woman to her husband and his patrilineal group, that there was a separation of rights *in uxorem* from rights *in genetricem*, and that therefore the African wife might be said to enjoy a measure of "sexual autonomy," a conclusion strengthened by rules of compensation when adultery was charged. By contrast, in the upper-caste North Indian case the parallel translation issue revolved around the phenomenon of "dowry," which labelled marriage payments that accompanied the passage of women into marriage. There was clearly a North Indian concern with a husband's controlling the sexuality of his wife and with the "purity" of the status of his children. If the wife's "purity" through exclusive access to her husband was assured, then the children's status could be directly linked to their father's. Adultery by a woman was a grievous matter, and the husband's rights *in uxorem* and *in genetricem* were seen as indissolubly merged. Hence the conclusion that "the patriarchal domination" of women was and is greater in North India than in Sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, this "negative" judgment directed at the North Indian upper-caste woman seemed to be further reinforced and accented by the conspicuous occurrence in the past of female infanticide, especially among the martial castes, and of the systematic fatal neglect of female offspring right into modern times. Commentators tended to place the costs of marriage, especially of dowry payments, at the door of female neglect and female infanticide.

But the certainty of such positive and negative accounting that arrives at the seemingly greater subordination of the Indian woman begins to become blurred when we turn the kaleidoscope.

From the "kinship" point of view, polygynous marriage is in accord with the African emphasis on the reproductive capacity of the woman and her producing the maximum number of children. Thus in terms of the language of "kinship" analysis it has been remarked that matrilineage is part of the polygynous marriage complex and both are special features of the African patrilineal system. But perhaps the most interesting ramifications of West and East African polygyny are to be seen in the economic sphere. It is accepted as a general and gross fact that the African women of these regions are the primary producers of food, especially in the form of root crops, and despite taking into account male contributions to the felling of bushes and trees, their firing, the building of mounds, and so on, the appellation "female farming systems" with regard to food gardens (though not new grain and cash crops) still makes its point. Now we perceive a significant pattern: in the polygynous compound and the house-property complex wives enjoy a certain amount of "economic independence" in the sense of having control of some of the funds they acquire through sale of portions of the crops they grow. By the same token, the African wife can expect only limited financial support from her husband and her children. If such disaggregation is further pursued, one will have to come to the conclusion that the concept of a "household economy," of assets commonly held and deployed by household heads on behalf of the unitary household, will make little sense in this context. I shall elaborate on this later, but here let me indicate that the ineligibility of the Sub-Saharan African woman in most cases to control the allocation of land in shifting agriculture and, under conditions of permanent agriculture, to inherit patrimonial property, especially land, and, where pastoralism is relevant, to control the allocation of herds, together with her expectation of limited economic support from her husband, puts her in a "vulnerable" position that the North Indian high-caste woman is less exposed to.

There is no doubt that the North Indian upper-caste normative preference is for monogamy, and it is extensively implemented. (But several monogamous pairs, typically consisting of parents and sons with their wives and children, constitute the Indian joint family, whose significance will be elaborated shortly.) It is well known that upper-caste North Indian women tend not to do agricultural work and to be confined to domestic duties. Indeed, considerations of prestige and orthodoxy demand the confinement of women. But it should be appreciated—as Goody has largely failed to do in *Production and Reproduction*—that high-caste male freedom from menial labor and the conspicuous removal of high-caste females from public view are possible only because the system of rural production is predicated on the existence of a social and religious division of labor allocated to a number of castes coexisting in a locality. The high-caste privileges are dependent on the availability and exploitation of low-caste agricultural labor, both male and female. Moreover, women of these lower orders enjoy much greater freedom of movement outside their

homes; bridewealth rather than dowry payments are exacted on their marriages, thus accenting the economic value of their labor; and divorce, separation, and remarriage, including remarriage of widows, are frequently open to them. These larger systemic features of the Indian local society and economy are not taken as a fundamental premise in Goody's attempt to "generate" Indian social forms from plough agriculture and its capacity to produce surplus. Be that as it may, the other side of the coin of the removal of the upper-caste Indian female from active agricultural work is the obligation of her husband and his joint family to support her and her children and to continue to do so when she is widowed. If she is dependent, she is also to some degree protected.

It is appropriate at this point to change focus and to foreground the *positive ideological valuations* which are placed on the Hindu woman as bride, as wife, as mother, and so on. In Hindu culture there is a positive accent on marriage as a socially necessary, auspicious institution that acts as a fulcrum for a whole network of transactions and relations. The concept of *kanyādāna*, the elevation of bride and groom to the status of auspicious divinities at the marriage rite, the ideological emphasis on the unity of the conjugal pair, the ideas and rituals surrounding the transformation and incorporation of the wife into her husband's *gotra*, the association of her generative capacities as wife with Lakshmi, the goddess of good fortune and wealth, and her indispensability for tending the domestic fire and for propitiating the ancestors of the husband's lineage—such ideological and ritual elaborations are conspicuously weak, even absent, as far as I can see, in the African ethnography concerning the conjugal state. By contrast, in North India domestic and wider social life is predicated on the stability of the conjugal bond (the obverse of this being the woman's inability to initiate or secure divorce).

We may thus situate the high-caste Hindu joint family in this landscape. The joint family in its "mature" form is not merely a coresident group whose core is made up of parents and married sons with their spouses (and their unmarried children); it is also a three- (sometimes four-) generational collection of persons tied by shares in patrimonial property in whose transmission they have a vital interest.

It is against this backdrop of joint-family linkage of persons with differential property rights that we must view the composition and destination of the components of "dowry" payments. I have indicated the need to revise Goody's and my inaccurate formulation in *Bridewealth and Dowry* of dowry as a woman's premortem inheritance which upon her marriage joins her husband's assets to form a conjugal fund. Recent ethnography has clearly established that typically the *dahej* or its counterpart can be divided into three portions—one part, not insubstantial, that the bride may keep as her personal property, the second part, the most substantial, being controlled by the groom's joint family (especially his parents) and susceptible to use as "circulating goods" in the marriage of its daughters, and the third part meant as gifts to the women of the groom's joint family and his

married sisters and father's sisters. This third portion, especially that given to the groom's married sisters and his father's sisters, is in alliance terminology given to the groom's superior "wife takers," the groom's family in turn being superior wife takers to the bride's family.

Now, the domestic-cycle dynamics of the Indian joint family revolve around *the process of partition* by which at a certain point—usually with the death of parents, sometimes earlier or later—the joint family disaggregates into nuclear families of married brothers. In this sense it is correct to say that in due course joint-family assets—whatever remains after dowrying the "daughters of the house"—break up into the *conjugal funds* of the married brothers. Thus, after all, when due notice is taken of the joint family as a corporate group *potentially* destined to partition into its conjugal pairs and conjugal funds, the essential theses of *Bridewealth and Dowry* remain unshaken. These theses are that in propertied India there is usually a diverging devolution or double transmission of property to and through both males and females and that this transmission emphasizes vertical bonds between parents and children at the cost of lateral lineage bonds.

And if we take due notice again of the destination of major portions of the "dowry" given at the woman's marriage—especially those portions that make possible the future marriages and reinforce the accomplished marriages of the groom's sisters, we can appreciate the active *agency* of the Indian woman as a vehicle and transformer of male social status in the complex game of hypergamy and alliance. Seen in its widest social, political, and economic framework, we can say that the Indian valuation of a woman as "the gift of a virgin," as auspicious Lakshmi, as a carrier of dowry, and so on, organically fits into the strategies and processes by which, in a multicaste context suffused with hierarchical concerns and status competition, groups of "dominant-caste" males dispersed in villages over a region strive to *maintain (and increase) their regional dominance* through the lateral links of hypergamous marriage and of affinity.

Now, what kind of parallel global picture can we give of the Sub-Saharan African social complex?

By contrast with North India, the salient features in West and East Africa are the polygynous compound and the house-property complex and the positive creative and transforming agency and capacities invested in the woman as a producer of children and (with the help of these children) of food crops. In such a context matrifiliation provides the grid on which the polygynous compound and the female-managed gardens will fragment in time into mother-son groups. The instability of marriage, the woman's greater autonomy with regard to sexuality and agricultural income, and the graduated return of bride-price pegged to number of children born in the case of divorce fit with the fact that we are confronted here with domestic organizations to which the notion of unitary "household economy" in the economist's sense can scarcely apply. In their own widest socio-politico-economic framework, all the components

concerning women, marriage, polygyny, agricultural organization, and so on, contribute to the maximum peopling of African patrilineages and the maintenance of male lineage solidarity at the local level. Typically, the accent is not so much on lineage hierarchical ranking as on the equality of equivalent segments and their combination into larger wholes through fusion. Woman as producer in both production and reproduction fits here, just as woman as status transformer and as an integral part of the conjugal union fits in the North Indian context. The accents on the vertical and double transmission of assets through joint families fated to partition and on the achievement of regional caste or subcaste dominance through far-flung hypergamous marriage alliances are in line with the continual occurrence of fission and status differentiation within the North Indian lineages and clans. This provides a contrast to the African stereotype of lateral (before vertical) transmission of landed property through males, women's inability to inherit land, and the objective of forging the solidary lineages of patrilineally related males that are the political building blocks of a "segmentary" society, which, while vesting the control of land in various levels of the male lineage or clan, at the same time allows for the exploitation and usufruct of that land by mother-centered clusters.

It is possible that the African stereotype of lateral before vertical transmission of property and relative equality of lineage segments may have to be modified in certain contexts. A case in point is that of some of the Southern Bantu societies, in which the political economy traditionally combined agriculture with pastoralism.²⁰ Cattle, a male-accented form of movable wealth, was seen as begetting children in that payments of cattle as bridewealth secured children for the husband's house and patrilineage. The so-called cattle-linked brother-and-sister complex meant that bridewealth cattle received on behalf of a woman at her marriage enabled a brother of her "house" to marry and set up his own family. Such a woman then had important claims on her brother, including the securing of his daughter for her son. Such matrilateral cross-cousin marriage allowed a *repetition* of the marriage alliance, gave a vertical or intergenerational axis to relations hinging upon bride-wealth, and connected brother and sister in one generation, mother's brother and sister's son in the next, and so on.

Goody, while recognizing the presence of stratification in certain African societies, has remarked on the

20. These features pertaining to Bantu societies are discussed by Kuper (1982a) and are in part referred to in his introduction by Comaroff (1980). It is remarkable that despite many recent changes, such as migration of men to urban areas for work and changes in the form and contexts of bridewealth payments, there are distinct continuities in these societies with the past. For example, Krige (1981:149) reports that "despite all the factors at work in the direction of change in the marriage system of the Lovedu, the traditional norms still hold for the population (probably over 80%). Cross-cousin marriage, despite challenges and decreasing incidence, remains the foundation of the Lovedu system of marriage," polygyny "is still common," and the extended family predominates.

open connubium prevailing there between chiefly and aristocratic strata, on the one hand, and commoners, on the other, with women passing in both directions, as evidence of a greater egalitarianism than in Eurasian contexts that stress endogamy (marriage between persons of the same social status). But the Swazi among the Southern Bantu are an example in which "marrying up" is preferred to "marrying down" and aristocrats extract a larger bride-price for the woman whom they "send down" and pay a smaller bride-price for the woman of lower status whom they marry. In such a situation, differential bridewealth is closely linked to the creation, maintenance, and reproduction of status differences over time between lineages and descent groups.

Comments

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The most important contribution of Tambiah's paper is to move the argument about the "position" or "status" of women in society away from a laundry list of reductionist variables regarding gender hierarchy and position it squarely within a dialogue that "illuminates the existential emphases, preoccupations, and dilemmas around which the society or culture in question has constructed its form of life along the axis of male and female valuations." In doing so, the paper creatively demonstrates the ways in which a fruitful comparative discourse on the meaning of marriage transactions and the role of gender within those transactions may be constructed. Rather than a study of gender hierarchy or of the "position of women" in any conventional sense, it is a critique of unexamined methods of translation and of the application of anthropological or Western categories that do not fit the perceptions of members of the society in question. It is also a sophisticated demonstration of the role of gender in reproducing—biologically, materially, and ideologically—particular hierarchies and social forms. Tambiah cogently argues that marriage payments and transactions are linked to the "creation, maintenance, and reproduction of status differences over time between lineages and descent groups."

The arguments are particularly forceful regarding the North Indian situation. Tambiah brings a welcome corrective to the view of North Indian women as subjugated, hopelessly dominated, and polluting—saddled with a role that has little if any efficacy in reproducing society except in a narrow biological sense. While admitting that a "dark side" to the Indian valuation of women exists, Tambiah counterbalances it with an "internal view" that stresses the "notions of purity, auspiciousness, and divinity" surrounding the status of a virgin—a status that women bring to marriage. From an internal view it is women who have the important capacity to

elevate the social level of their natal families through hypergamous marriages. Therefore, far from being inactive, even negative players in society, women play a critical role as "transforming agencies" in reproducing and transforming Indian structures and hierarchies. Given the nature of the evidence, the argument for the positive valuation of women in North India becomes much more powerful if we think of it in terms of the efficacy of "femaleness" and the role of gender ideology in social reproduction rather than as a claim about women's existential "position" or "status."

In addition to this corrective, Tambiah's modification of earlier formulations of dowry in India is an important contribution to the understanding of Indian marriage transactions and strategies. The facts that dowry is not simply a "premortem inheritance" for the bride, that a range of affinal prestations passes between the two families before and during the wedding, and that a substantial portion of the dowry proper is at the disposal of the joint family of the groom are crucial to an understanding of these strategies.

While I applaud Tambiah's approach and fundamentally agree with his conclusions, there are a few additional remarks that should be made regarding the African situation. The statement that an Indian woman "enjoys greater economic security than her African counterpart when she becomes a widow" does not take into account the very real rights many African women enjoy in their natal families—as daughters (and, one might add, often as unmarried daughters with children), as divorcees, and as widows. Nor does it take into account institutions such as widow inheritance in its various forms or the very real responsibility sons usually have for their widowed mothers. The security African women may sometimes lose—or never have—as wives they often gain as daughters and mothers. The critique of Meillassoux's generalized lineage or domestic mode of production is well taken; however, in much of West Africa and certainly in the larger chiefdoms, control over marriage arrangements and alliances has constituted the fastest and most assured path to status, wealth, and power for ambitious lineage heads and "big men" (Brain 1972, Rowlands 1979).

Finally, with some exceptions, this paper is oddly ahistorical. It would be interesting to hear from the author about the effects of the commoditization of bridewealth on the institution of bridewealth as a whole. Evidence from West Africa would suggest that along with the formation of an elite (if not an elite class as such) there is a tendency for bridewealth to "match like with like" in much the same way as dowry—although with very different effects (Goheen 1984, Guyer n.d.) In fact, with the exception of the dismissal of current bride burnings in India as "an intensified modern pathology" erupting under various conditions, the effects of both Indian and African modernization and commoditization are absent from the analysis. Many readers would be interested in Tambiah's views on these issues.

None of these criticisms undermines the overall argument of the paper or detracts from the importance of its

project. Tambiah cogently demonstrates the complexities inherent in cross-cultural comparison and in doing so creates not Weberian “ideal types” but sophisticated examples of “ideal systems” or “ideal dialogues” that can be used to analyze similarities and differences regarding the “position of women”—the role of gender and gender ideology—both within and between the African and Indian cultural worlds.

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13 III 89

Tambiah hopes to achieve a subtle and sensitive alternative to the totalizing “position-of-women” studies that for many years dominated feminist anthropology. As he writes,

any global characterization of “the position of women” is difficult because it is unclear whether even within the confines of a single society the various statuses of women and their relations to one another and to the statuses of men can be meaningfully aggregated and summed up. If such aggregations are difficult to construct within a society, they are even more difficult to arrive at in the comparison of societies.

Yet in the pages that follow he swims in these same dangerous waters.

Bridewealth and Dowry was an exciting work in its time because of the bold generalizations its authors dared to put forward, but in the intervening years the anthropology of gender has come a long way. We should no longer feel comfortable with sweeping generalizations about regions as vast as Sub-Saharan Africa or about the schemes of gender relations found there. Collections such as Oppong's *Female and Male in West Africa* (1983) demonstrate how variable women's roles are even within West Africa, and works such as Leis's (1974) comparison of Ijaw women of two Nigerian communities have shown how dramatically women's situations may differ even in two villages of a single ethnic group. Thanks to a recently published volume (Potash 1986) we now know that African women have widely varying options when they become widows. Similarly, Sacks's ground-breaking book *Sisters and Wives* (1979) has taught us to be wary of making general statements about the women of a given society without being precise about which kinship roles we are referring to. In particular, Sacks takes Africanist anthropologists to task for continually referring to “women” when what is often meant is “wives.” In African women-as-wives are frequently obliged to appear as second-class citizens (though the structural reality beneath the surface is usually far more complicated), African women-as-sisters are generally—and publicly—accorded great respect by men even in patrilineal and seemingly “patriarchal” societies.

If the kinship structures of individual societies are so

multilayered, much more complex must be their systems of thought—the conceptual undergirding of rituals, taboos, and so forth, themselves often contradictory (e.g., Gottlieb n.d.). This is no less true elsewhere in the world, as the contributors to several recent volumes on gender have demonstrated (e.g., Ortner and Whitehead 1981, MacCormack and Strathern 1980, Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). Tambiah's citation of recent fine-grained studies on the disposition of the Indian dowry to refine his earlier analysis is encouraging, but for Africa he persists in assuming homogeneity both within the societies he mentions and across the continent at large.

It is disturbing, then, to see Tambiah still adhering to the basic assumptions of *Bridewealth and Dowry*, still generalizing about “the position of women” in Africa vis-à-vis their counterparts in India. (The point has been made before but perhaps bears repeating: would anyone take seriously an article on “the position of men” in Africa compared with their counterparts in India? Why is it acceptable to do so for women?) Comparison, to be meaningful, must rely confidently on ethnographic descriptions that are faithful to the cultures being compared; to be faithful, such descriptions must often celebrate rather than evade messy ethnographic complexities. The anthropology of gender is beginning to do just this (e.g., Sanday and Goodenough n.d.). Perhaps we are not yet ready for the sorts of broad generalizations that Tambiah is proposing.

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Tambiah takes up a comparative problem that has engaged anthropologists intermittently over decades and chips away again at the rock face. Less implicitly evolutionary than its important predecessor, more broadly contextual in interpretation, more explicitly critical of external criteria (especially judgmental ones he sees as imported from certain branches of feminist thinking), his paper develops a basis for configurational comparison between high-caste Indian and African constructions of marriage. The material-political conditions are still central to the exploration of difference, although the ideal, the “auspiciousness,” of marriage is accorded an importance which is not entirely derivative.

In the short space for comment I would like to move even further away from the straight comparison, with its still mildly evolutionary undertones, and suggest that the differences are even wider. Tambiah encourages us to abandon the scalar variables of autonomy, relative status, and so on, and look for the qualitative facets of a general configuration around “the position of women” by working outwards from marriage payments to a gestalt of femaleness, status, the meaning and nature of wealth, and the concept of conjugality. From his own account, and I think he is right, the key qualitative difference is the separability of rights *in uxorem* from rights *in geneticem* in many African conceptual

schemes and their indissolubility in high-caste Indian culture. But he devotes less attention to African than to Indian ritualization of persons and relationships, and here I think the contrasts are even sharper.

Rights *in uxorem* here are mainly sexual rights rather than the whole set of domestic services (cooking and so on). "Marriage as process" in Africa rests on the simple fact that in much of indigenous Africa sexual and reproductive relationships can be envisaged and acted on only partially convergently with the establishment of social parenthood and wider kinship bonds. If one includes in the discussion not only the cycle of property devolution, as Tambiah does, but the individual life cycle, other stages in social maturation have far more ritual importance in Africa than marriage: initiation, achievement of membership in ritual societies, steps in age-grades, and, above all, the achievement of ancestorhood at death. What Eurasian traditions refer to as conjugality is not a key institution in Africa either as the architecture within which people live their sexual and reproductive lives or as the channel through which property is transmitted. In fact, the conceptual division between real property and rights in people is indistinct.

A different world of possibilities is entailed. To take a single example, drawing on inferences from the classic Indian ethnography it would seem hardly possible to imagine the configuration of practices around marriage that I found during a return visit to a Yoruba community after 20 years. Except for some Christians, the ritual importance of marriage seemed actually to have declined while naming, freedom from apprenticeship, chieftaincy, and funerals—and even the more minor entertainments of life such as association meetings—had been elaborated. Enthusiasm for weddings is quite limited by comparison with that for other rituals; the vibrant "announcement" pages of the newspaper are full of memorials and funerals rather than weddings. Younger people were engaged in various stages of marriage-as-process. One spiritual leader of a small community had, at the age of about 80, started a relationship that he referred to as marriage but that was not coresident with a 60-year-old widow, as he said, "for pleasure." No one's property is affected. A substantial proportion of the marriages I had known had persisted over 20 years but through the will to stay together rather than any legal, ritual, or ideological constructions. A full contextualization of marriage payments for a comparative analysis in the ethnographic present should therefore go beyond the property cycle to include the ritual context of the personal life cycle in both cases.

In a marvelously sensitive survey, Reisman (1986) has suggested a pervasive sense of duality or plurality in the concept of the person embodied in African ritual, along with a dramatization of the connectedness of personal attributes and forces in the world outside. Differentiation and identity cross the bounds of "the individual"; the person is represented in ritual imagery as a composite. Following this logic, marriage—or any other relationship—can only ever be partial, leaving other aspects of connectedness intact unless actively severed or domi-

nated in specific circumstances. Such insights do not counter a materialist understanding of the India/Africa contrast, but they augment the configuration in essential ways.

The way in which these configurations work under the various pressures of current life on property and personal status is an important area for current research: how their components and connections give or resist, which provisions fall away and which categories of persons find themselves caught in unlivable logical contradictions or pragmatic impossibilities. It demands, however, augmenting the kind of work Tambiah has done here with a dynamic perspective, because avenues of change are not written into the logic of the model but emerge from historical conjunctures.

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14 III 89

In his consideration of such cultural constructs as dowry, bridewealth, stratification, patriarchal domination, and the subordination of women as expressed in Sub-Saharan Africa and among high-caste North Indians, Tambiah does great service to the study of not only these topics but the (perhaps) broader ones of family organization and gender studies. He underscores his recognition that the patrilineal systems characteristic of the two areas were "quite different totalities" with a discussion of significant contrasts such as separation of the husband's rights *in uxorem* from those *in genetricem* in Africa and a merging of the two types of rights in India. Also welcome is his careful discussion of the differing meanings of familiar concepts such as "patriarchal domination" and "subordination" of women when applied to the two cultural areas, noting the importance of such factors as "matrifiliation," the "certain amount" of "economic independence" of women, and the inappropriateness of the concept of a "household economy" in the African setting. His examination of the complexities of such comparisons leads to several stimulating propositions. For example, he argues that, given other factors in the African situation which limit the woman's control over necessary resources, the African woman is more "vulnerable" in the sense that she is not thus "protected" economically, while the "removal of the upper-caste Indian women from active agricultural work" and the concomitant "obligation of her husband and his joint family to support her and her children" do provide this protection. It is beyond the scope of this response to question the apparent assumption here that "protection" of this type signals a higher position for women (despite my acknowledgment that this is a major issue in the study of gender systems). Rather, I applaud his refinement of these conceptual constructs by applying them to particular cases.

Tambiah's comments on the "positive ideological valuations" of Hindu women are also valuable in provid-

ing a balanced picture of the upper-caste North Indian woman's position. However, I wish he had followed through on his mention of the various roles that she plays ("bride, wife, mother, and so on") with a discussion of the same. In particular, it would have been informative if he had considered these within the frameworks provided by such scholars as Ortner and Whitehead (1981) in their discussion of the mother-sister-wife trio of roles or Bennett's (1983) examination of the wife-sister pair. Given the depth of his work in this area, his comments would certainly have provided further elucidation of these frameworks.

Further, although Tambiah explicitly limits his discussion to North Africa and North India, I hope he will next update his earlier discussion of dowry and bridewealth in Southeast Asia, South India, and Sri Lanka. If, in so doing, he were to engage Ortner's (1981) suggestion that the "cognatic-endogamous kinship/marriage organizations" found in those areas, in contrast to North India's patrilineal and exogamous kin groups, are stable elements of indigenous culture rather than weakenings of the classical Indian patterns, his contributions to the discourse would provide further illumination of the roles played by dowry and bridewealth in nonpatrilineal societies.

Finally, although I am here responding to an article not yet written, there are other important questions about dowry and bridewealth that need to be asked, and I wish that someone of Tambiah's stature would address them. He himself states that he uses dowry and bridewealth to explain the "truly important contours of specific societies," which is undeniably a legitimate approach and one that I find more rewarding than the approaches he explicitly rejects here. However, there is little here of what is sometimes called the "Weberian" approach—examination of the meaning of these cultural constructs to the actor (Ortner and Whitehead 1981:12). Rather, dowry and bridewealth are explained in relation to major social institutions, e.g., patrilineages and male lineage solidarity in Africa and caste dominance and the hypergamous marriage alliances that determine social status in North India. Many significant questions therefore remain unaddressed. For example, what can we say about the esthetic significance of the dowry or trousseau, especially for the women involved in making the items that become significant parts of it? What of the prestige and self-esteem linked to pride in their craftsmanship both among the women and among the men who are responsible for/attached to them? What of the development of the affectional mother-daughter ties, as well as those among women more generally, as they work together in planning and creating the items that will become part of the dowry or trousseau? What of the woman's social networks that influence decisions related to dowry and bridewealth and are in turn influenced by the prestige attached to the bride according to the size of her dowry or bridewealth? What of the emotional significance for the bride of the size of the latter or of the emotional strains engendered by the negotiations involving her? All of these questions are re-

lated to other dimensions of the woman's "position," as broadly defined; many are related to her position as defined by her self-concept, by a sense of her own strength, power, and importance. My own work for several years in Turkish society, usually glossed as "patrilineal" and "patriarchal," and for a briefer period in South India suggests that these questions are not irrelevant or trivial. Rather, the dimensions explored by Tambiah here, although long-legitimated by such theories as Lévi-Strauss's "exchange-of-women" framework, need to be balanced by exploration of such questions as those outlined above.

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Tambiah's project—the comparison of African and northern Indian social forms—is plagued by questionable assumptions. Ideal types of the sort Tambiah is dealing with (the African patrilineal-polygynous-bridewealth-female-farming complex and the Indian caste-hypergamy-dowry-male-farming complex) assume away both history and regional variation. Is it possible to compare such abstract entities, as if they had an internal causal logic of their own, when by the mid-20th century (the historical present of these ideal types) the two continents had both been subjected to at least 300 years of rather different types of European penetration? How much the slave trade in Africa affected population density and property forms, how pervasively colonialism effected a transformation from "elementary" to "complex" marriage structures (see, e.g., Bohannan 1955:67), and how influential colonialism was in bringing about the feminization of agriculture are by no means settled questions, but the effect of this historical encounter on African social forms was certainly profound and quite different from that on India. Similarly, Tambiah's analysis also ignores the enormous variation both within and between regions—for example, ascribing an unwarranted degree of homogeneity to the African material.

While this flattening out of crucial differences is perhaps inevitable in any effort as ambitious as Tambiah's—the comparison of whole continents—even at the level of ideal types his analysis is problematic. As an Africanist, I was struck by the extent to which his characterization of the social forms of the two areas replicates a bias in the literature. African marriage, we are told, is motivated by nature (the biological reproduction of lineages) and Indian marriage by culture (caste, status, and hierarchy). In addition, the Indian caste-hypergamy-dowry complex is shown to be tied into regional political-economic systems (and hence the histories of larger areas) while the African patrilineal complex is not. Tambiah's characterization thus not only generates a mistaken nature/culture contrast but also reproduces the 1940s view of the timeless, decontextualized African society—a view that much of the recent Africanist historical literature has convincingly undermined.

In addition to this unequal portrayal, there is a larger substantive shortcoming in Tambiah's analysis of the African material. Much of that analysis takes lineage theory—in particular, the African “patrilineal complex”—for granted and therefore reifies a certain outdated modelling of African social life. The notion of the lineage as a useful analytic construct has confronted enormous empirical and theoretical difficulties (see, e.g., Kuper 1982*b*; 1988:190–209 and Schneider 1984; cf. Strathern 1988). Empirically, it has been repeatedly shown that there is little fit between the model of a lineage system and on-the-ground relations. The Nuer material (Evans-Pritchard 1940, 1951) and much of the subsequent commentary on that work (e.g. Gough 1971, Southall 1986) have provided perhaps the best illustration of this point. Theoretically, descent theory is underwritten by a series of Western metaphysical, biological, and functionalist assumptions. In addition—and just as important, given Tambiah's emphasis on an approach which relies on categories derived from “within the tradition”—descent theory has consistently failed to locate its modelling of African social life in the indigenous categories. Tallensi, for example, have no term for lineage or for most of the segments of a lineage. And, as Kuper (1988:200) has pointed out, the diagram that Nuer drew for Evans-Pritchard of the relationships among social groups bears no resemblance to the diagram of a segmentary lineage.

How, then, to move beyond a lineage-based account of African kinship and society? One way is to follow the leads of Kuper (1982*a*), Héritier (1981), and others (Muller 1969, 1973, 1980; Gottlieb 1986) who have recently focused on marriage alliance. As the plethora of unanalyzed references to “elementary” marriage rules in the older literature strongly suggests, an approach similar to these recent efforts is likely to produce fruitful results in other contexts as well. To cite only a few examples from some of the better-known peoples, the Tiv practiced sister exchange (Bohannan 1955:65–67), the Lowili father's-sister's-daughter marriage (Goody 1956:48), and the Dogon mother's-brother's-daughter marriage (Griaule and Dieterlen 1986:43).

Another possibility is to take seriously what Tambiah claims is true for India but not for Africa: the complementary combination of male and female. Throughout West Africa (and I suspect more broadly as well), the conjugal pair, and the combination of “male” and “female” more generally, is a central cultural value elaborated in both ritual and economic contexts. The two Tallensi clans (Namoos and Talis), for example, are “husband” and “wife” to one another (Fortes 1987:44). Similarly, Dogon clans are either “male” or “female” (Griaule and Dieterlen 1986:45). Further, androgyny, cross-sex twins, gendered sky/earth pairs, and so on, are pervasive in the myths and cosmologies of West African peoples. In the economic domain, the same principle applies: homesteads are typically defined in terms of the complementarity of male and female labors. To argue, as Tambiah does, that husband and wife in Africa do not form a “paired unity” because of the high incidence of

divorce and the economic “independence” of women is to miss the point that divorce is typically followed by remarriage and to ignore the crucial fact that women's independence as producers is limited by their obligations as contributors to domestic consumption. (I find salutary Tambiah's inclination to deconstruct the idea that African women are better off than their Indian counterparts. However, rather than focus on the additional security that Indian women possess, he might have more profitably questioned the notion of independence in the African context. “Independence” and “autonomy” are, after all, Western preoccupations.)

I would suggest that an investigation of these central and pervasive cultural representations, rather than of the phantom segmentary lineage, would lead us to a better understanding of African societies and then, perhaps, provide the basis for a comparison with other areas of the world.

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On the whole I agree with the line of Tambiah's rather complex argument, but on the basis of my own studies of dowry in northeastern India (1972, 1987) I want to add some remarks on the assumptions about what is essential for high status.

To understand the negative attitude of Westerners toward bridewealth and dowry as “diminishing” the social status of women, it is necessary to examine more closely the Western notion of individual status.¹ As Elias (1978:228) says, “Concepts such as ‘individual’ and ‘society’ do not relate to two objects existing separately but to different yet inseparable aspects of the same human beings,” humans as individuals and humans as groups. For reasons not to be discussed here, however, human beings are more and more viewed in the West as if they were individuals separated from society, “with the individual regarded as the actual reality and society treated as an epiphenomenon” (Elias 1978:228). According to this view, the social statuses of individuals depend on the extent to which they are able to build and control their own positions in society, “free from dependence on the will of others”—a freedom which, as MacPherson (1962:3) has shown, is seen as a function of possession.

That the human condition is ambivalent, however, opens the possibility of emphasizing either of the two dimensions. Thus cultural codes may emphasize individuality or group orientation. From Tambiah's analysis and all the ethnographic accounts it is clear that bridewealth and dowry are bound to cultural codes that

1. A negative attitude that nowadays is shared by most of the Indian intelligentsia. As Paul (1986:9) says, however, “people in contemporary Indian society respond to dowry on two different planes: theoretically most people condemn it and on a practical plane most of them resort to it.”

give great importance to group membership. The partners in such marriage contracts are seen primarily as representatives of groups and, what is more important, themselves experience their statuses as intimately linked to the statuses of their groups. It is therefore important to evaluate bridewealth and dowry from a group-oriented perspective. I shall do so here with reference to Sharma's (1980) criticism of Tambiah's thesis that dowry is an ante-mortem inheritance.

Given her "individualistic bias," Sharma makes it a point to show that dowry can in no way be seen as a form of equal sharing of heritable property by women and men. According to her this is "a convenient fiction which serves to obscure a real difference between men's and women's relationships to property" (p. 48). Tambiah now admits that it was wrong to identify dowry as an ante-mortem inheritance. With him, however, I see dowry as an attribute of diverging devolution of property.

Sharma herself makes clear that women in the Indian social setting are very much aware that they have rights to the property through which their parents (primarily fathers) express their social status (p. 53): "although women customarily did not inherit land and most of them still do not, in spite of modern legislation which permits them to do so, many women still speak of land as though this discrimination did not exist. A woman will talk about 'my land' or 'our land' referring to the land held in the name of her father or by her husband's family. *Women do not speak as though they felt excluded from ownership* [emphasis mine]." This is crucial because of its similarity to a man's perspective on property, group membership, and status. As Sharma says, in India

ideally, any substantial or valuable item of property is a resource which may nominally be held by an individual, but from which all the other members of the household might expect to benefit were the family in difficulties. So while land is registered in the name of the male head of the household, he is regarded as holding property on behalf of other members, male and female. In this broad sense it is as much theirs as his, but of course he has immediate control over it and it cannot be alienated or divided unless he agrees.

Given the upper-caste preference for delaying the partition of joint property, men's control over property will thus be indirect for most of their lives. Following Sharma's reasoning there would, then, be no question of "real" control and consequently little scope for building individual status. From a group-oriented perspective, however, the necessity to realize one's own ends through private property and direct control is not so obvious.

As I have said, Sharma is right when she says that dowry is not an ante-mortem substitute for the land daughters cannot inherit. She is also right when she states that "in practice dowry is treated as a passport to a good match, a high-status husband and the favour of one's in-laws." Where it is considered good to "invest in

people" (Srinivas 1961:30–31) instead of in private property, it is good to have one's marriage arranged and sealed through dowry, thus strengthening the mutual claims arising from basically ascribed social statuses.

There is no doubt that rights in private property offer better chances for control, but it is not clear whether this gives people a greater sense of security than the feeling of belonging that can be derived from awareness of having claims on one's "own" people. The dilemma of the human condition is, after all, that human beings are individuals—separate and somewhat autonomous—who at the same time want to belong to others and want others to belong to them. The consequences of this should certainly not be ignored in studying social status and its relationship to dowry and bridewealth.

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The two parts of Tambiah's article are only superficially related, and I find each, for different reasons, unsatisfactory.

In the first part Tambiah attempts to examine the position of women in North India and Sub-Saharan Africa, but any such comparison is meaningless as long as it remains unclear what is meant by "position." He seems at first to be thinking of "economic position" or perhaps "degree of economic independence," but next we are told that the fact that Indian women are supposedly so much better protected by their husbands is ample compensation for their lack of economic independence. In the final section we are presented with a discourse on the position of women in Indian ideology. Unfortunately, this is not balanced by a similar discussion concerning African women, so while Indian women are ideologically presented as fertility goddesses, African women are left to toil (economically independent) in the soil.

The second part calls for a more serious discussion, and since I am unfamiliar with the Indian ethnography I will limit myself to a few remarks with regard to Sub-Saharan Africa:

First, I object to the reduction of the enormously varied African ethnography to a system characterized by patrilineally related, land-controlling, polygamously married men. The comparison would have been much more meaningful if the author had selected several African societies in which descent is traced patrilineally, land is scarce (for if it is not scarce, "control" over land is meaningless), and most men are married polygamously. If such societies could be found, they could be meaningfully compared with the North Indian high-caste groups; if not, the generalization would certainly be invalid.

Secondly, I think that Tambiah overstates the importance of landownership. If land is thought ultimately to belong to ancestors and/or local communities, the effectiveness of control over it is seriously limited. I do not

underestimate the importance of disputes over land between men, but the question should be asked to what extent these disputes have an impact on women's rights to the use of land.

Thirdly, the asymmetry with regard to the importance of ideology that appears in the first part is again evident in the second. African bridewealth and marriage are reduced to purely economic transactions, and "ideological and ritual elaboration" are judged "weak, even absent." It is not difficult to cite numerous examples of societies in which men are, in one way or another, dependent on legally wedded wives in order to be able to communicate with their ancestors. Polygyny or frequent divorce in no way invalidates this. I will give two examples (admittedly not from patrilineal societies): Among the Plateau Tonga, a man was dependent upon his wife for contact with his own ancestors; to approach them he had to give them beer brewed by his legal wife (Colson 1962:50). And a Bemba man risked illness or death if he approached his ancestors before having ritually purified himself *together with his wife* after sexual intercourse (Richards 1940:19). The religious role regarding fertility of African women is of course different from that of Indian women, but it does not make sense to say that it does not exist.

Reply

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A major focus of my essay, as its title indicates, was to assess some of the propositions in *Bridewealth and Dowry*. That focus set certain limits to the essay. In the course of writing it, I was conscious of the possible imbalance in comparing upper-caste North India with Sub-Saharan Africa. In the recent literature both Goody and Meillassoux (1981), among others, have set a precedent for treating Sub-Saharan Africa globally. An informal consultation of some Africanist friends who read the essay in draft form produced no proposal for marking out regions or complexes within Africa with respect to my comparative problem, and the commentators who object to my global treatment themselves offer no constructive suggestions. Gottlieb is welcome to "celebrate . . . messy ethnographic complexities," but my comparative exercise requires seeing beyond the trees to the woods. My disappointment as regards proposals concerning the units of comparison does not of course extend to many helpful observations concerning greater internal differentiation within Africa: an example is Goheen's observation that ambitious lineage heads and "big men" in the larger chiefdoms of West Africa attempt to control marriage arrangements.

Piot levels the allegedly "historical" critique that my essay (which, I want to remind the reader, is principally

based on 20th-century ethnography and is therefore not "timeless" or "decontextualized") leaves out of account at least 300 years of rather different types of European penetration of India and Africa. As readers of my writings on South and Southeast Asia know, I am keenly interested in issues of historical continuities and changes. As I see it, the proper question to ask with regard to this essay is not whether Africa and India have been subject to different historical influences but whether it is "meaningful" and worthwhile to posit and compare two kinds of totalities as historical outcomes which, while being dynamic and open-ended, nevertheless portray certain distinctive contours. Are notions of "forms of life," "social formations," "cultural configurations" negated by our current understandings of history? I do not think so. In saying this, I do not deny the importance of addressing changes in division of labor and in marriage payments, preferences, and strategies influenced by contemporary world historical processes. This is a fascinating topic best left to a separate essay on current trends, both continuities and changes.

The best antidote to much of the criticism of Vuyk, Piot, and Gottlieb and the critique that best assists me in extending my comparative mapping of existential emphases and cultural designs is provided by Guyer. She affirms that "conjugalility" is not a key emphasis in Sub-Saharan Africa—that indeed the differences between that region and high-caste North India are even wider than I have suggested with regard to the way rights *in uxorem* and rights *in genetricem* are linked. She extends my comparative horizons when she suggests that I would discover the African emphases in stages of women's "social maturation" and life-cycle rituals outside the conjugal bond, such as passing through age-grades, achieving membership in ritual societies, staging mortuary rites, and attaining ancestorhood at death.

I appreciate Olson's constructive advice as to how I might elaborate my comparison by taking into account a wider array of women's roles. I have very much in mind another essay that will extend my comparison to include the spectrum of configurations to be found in the rice-growing societies of Southeast Asia.

Vuyk's attribution to me of the view that Indian women's being "supposedly so much better protected by their husbands is *ample compensation* for their lack of economic independence" (emphasis added) and her statement that "Indian women are ideologically presented as fertility goddesses, African women are left to toil . . . in the soil" are misreadings. I am not waving the flag on behalf of Indian women. In levelling the charge that "African bridewealth and marriage are reduced to *purely economic transactions*" (emphasis added) in my text, Vuyk appears to overlook the fact that "economic" valuations are just as much ideological and cultural as "religious" and "political" ones are and equally capable of being ritualized. *Contra* Gottlieb, I have nowhere intimated that I am concerned to replace a certain genre of studies "that for many years dominated feminist anthropology." Finally, I have never said, as Piot suggests, that "African marriage is motivated by nature . . . and

Indian marriage by culture," and his claim that lineages are nonexistent in Africa seems to me eccentric.

To van der Veen's amplification of how dowry figures in strengthening and sealing relationships and his suggestion that Indian objectives are better seen in terms of investment in people than in terms of rights of private property, I would add a slightly different point. Some parts of the *Dharmaśāstras* and, more emphatically, treatises such as *Mitākshara* (as well as local customary codes) underscore the "fusion" and inseparability of kinship (the sharing of bodily particles) and rights to share wealth and property. Somewhat the same idea was propounded by Maine (1891:260) when he declared that in ancient law (best exemplified in traditional India) the Roman distinction between Law of Persons and Law of Things did not apply and that in patriarchal society "the personal relations to each other of the men who comprise it are indistinguishably confounded with their property rights."

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