



**' We' ve Paid your Vagina to Make Children!':
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'We've paid your vagina to make children!'
Bridewealth and women's marital and reproductive autonomy in Port-Vila, Vanuatu

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ABSTRACT

In Vanuatu, the practice of bridewealth is widespread. However, according to international and national development organizations based in the capital Port-Vila, this practice impedes women's freedom, including women's reproductive autonomy. In this paper, using data gathered in Port-Vila between 2009 and 2018, I examine the practice of marriage in Port-Vila and argue against this development discourse. I analyze the transformations of marriage showing the increasing autonomy of young people in the selection of marriage partners and the links between marriage, bridewealth and reproductive autonomy. I emphasize the changes in the nature of bridewealth marriage in a contemporary urban context and its implications for female fertility control. I conclude that bridewealth is only one among several factors that influence women's reproductive autonomy in Port-Vila.

Keywords: bridewealth, bride price, autonomy, transformation of marriage, contraceptive methods, Vanuatu, urban landscape.

In Vanuatu, bridewealth, also known as bride price or *brad praes* in Bislama (the lingua franca of this Pacific Islands country), is widely practiced. A customary marriage usually requires rounds of prestations and counter-prestations, including but not limited to the bridewealth. In a survey conducted by the civil society organization Vanuatu Women's Centre in 2009, 81% of women aged 15 to 49 who ever had a civil, religious or custom ceremony to formalise their union declared that their marriage involved the payment of a bridewealth (VWC 2011: 79). The practice of the groom's family giving goods to the bride's family in order to ratify a customary marriage differs from one island to another. Yet, it is generally viewed as a means to cement relationships between social groups and to transfer women's productive and reproductive capacities from their family to their husband's family (Jolly 1997 [1994]: 116; UN CEDAW 2005: 57).

Despite the local importance attached to this practice, bridewealth is frequently criticized by international and national organizations based in the capital Port-Vila, because it is considered to commoditize women, enhance violence against them and limit their physical and material autonomy (Jolly 2015; UN CEDAW 2005: 57; 2016: 5; see also Horne *et al.* 2013). At the General Assembly of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva in May 2009, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reported Amnesty International's call for the Government of Vanuatu to work with the National Council of Chiefs to 'revoke' bridewealth payment in the country. It argued that this practice 'effectively puts a commercial

value on women' (UN Human Rights Council 2009: 4-5). In the 2016 report, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women of Vanuatu also expresses its concern:

The Committee urges the State party [...] to put an end to the application of customary law that provides for the payment of bride prices (UN CEDAW 2016: 5).

In July 2018, for the 50th anniversary of the University of the South Pacific, about thirty students from the Shepherd Islands performed a customary marriage show that seemed to answer the critics addressed to the payment of bridewealth. The presenter explained that:

The woman who arrives in the husband's clan (*nakamal*) is not something you pay at the store to stay (public applause). No! She creates a family relationship, she strengthens both clans.

In anthropology, the debates around bridewealth have often consisted in determining whether the items exchanged are gifts or commodities and whether the bride is considered as a person or a thing (Jolly 2015: 64). My perspective, and that of the other authors of this special issue, is quite different. I am indeed primarily interested in the changes in the nature of bridewealth marriage in an urban setting and the effects that bridewealth can have on people's lives, and in particular on women's reproductive autonomy. By reproductive autonomy, I mean the power to decide about and control matters associated with contraceptive use, pregnancy and childbearing (see Purdly 2006: 287; Upadhyay *et al* 2014: 20). In view of my research background in Vanuatu, I focus here on women's decisions about whether and when to practice contraception².

This paper examines the practice of bridewealth marriage in the capital Port-Vila and argues against international development discourses that depict bridewealth as impeding women's freedom, including their reproductive autonomy. For this purpose, I examine ethnographic evidence in order to help understand why people get married according to custom in Vanuatu (i.e. with bridewealth), in a contemporary urban context, and why bridewealth continues to be given. I then contextualise the place of bridewealth in relation to other constraints on women's reproductive autonomy, analyzing in particular the influence of this practice on the use of contraceptive methods in the Seaside Tongoa area, a poor district of Port-Vila where I did fieldwork. After presenting the data on marriages, fertility and family planning methods in Port-Vila, I analyse several factors that influence women's contraception use in Seaside Tongoa. I will conclude that bridewealth is only one of them.

WHY GET MARRIED ACCORDING TO CUSTOM NOWADAYS?

The Republic of Vanuatu, which remained a French-British condominium from 1906 to independence in 1980, and had in 2017 about 276,000 inhabitants speaking 138 languages, including English and French – the two former colonial languages – and Bislama – an English-based creole (François *et al.* 2015; Vandeputte-Tavo 2014). This extreme linguistic density reflects a strong cultural diversity that characterizes the archipelago and is strongly represented in the capital Port-Vila, where around 19% of the total population resides³. In the 19th century, various phases of internal migration led to the establishment of several urban communities⁴ in Port Vila, such as Seaside Tongoa, whose 1,000 inhabitants are originally from Tongoa Island, the largest of the Shepherd Islands in Central Vanuatu (see Servy 2017: 104-117). Despite the diversity of local practices, three types of marriages can be identified in Port-Vila and throughout Vanuatu: religious, civil and customary (or *kastom mared* in Bislama)⁵. Civil marriage usually simply involves signing a registry at the mayor's office or more often at the

end of the Christian ceremony. By contrast, a customary marriage is more complex and commonly implies a bridewealth payment that integrates the bride into the groom's *nakamal*⁶, which is 'a patrician segment bringing together a few closely related families' (Bonnemaison 1986: 171).

In Seaside Tongoa, marriage, especially in its customary form, is an important rite of passage. On the one hand, the *kastom mared* is the occasion for the bride to obtain a customary name (or 'taetel', in addition to her original first name) through one of her affines, and therefore rights and responsibilities in the groom's *nakamal* into which she has just been integrated. The title system and pyramidal structure of the social organization of Tongoa Island were described in the 1960s and 1970s by Jean Guiart (1973) and Joël Bonnemaison (1970; 1986). But because of these authors' focus on land rights and on male customary names associated with them, their study made no mention of the existence of customary female names on Tongoa Island. Every woman who marries according to custom systematically receives a customary name, such as Dariliou or Leipopogni, usually from her paternal aunt (who is from her husband's *nakamal* if it is a marriage between cross cousins). But female customary names, obtained after bridewealth payments are made, are not associated with land rights. For a woman, having a customary name means being in charge of the house, cooking on time, washing laundry, cleaning, etc. It also allows her to be respected in her husband's *nakamal*, to be able to ask for food and services from her in-laws in case of need and to be able to speak at public meetings. This practice still exists in urban centres. On the other hand, the groom does not obtain a customary name at the time of the customary marriage. However, it is necessary for a man to get married if he later wants to receive a customary name of high status⁷, notably because he needs a woman to look after the pigs and grow vegetables for ceremonial exchanges.

In rural Vanuatu, the importance of female premarital sexual abstinence was highlighted by research conducted in the 19th century (see for example Harrisson 1937: 43; Speiser 1996 [1923]: 266). Writing about Pentecost Island in the 1990s, Margaret Jolly argued that the bridewealth payment occurring during the customary marriage was 'seen as exchanged for a woman's labour, her sexuality and her fertility'. She explained that 'a woman is likely to be worth less if she is old or unhealthy, if she is not a virgin, if she has been married already and has children, and most especially if she is post-menopausal' (Jolly 1997[1994]: 132). However, during my fieldwork in Seaside Tongoa, female and male virginity were not strongly valued by the inhabitants of this urban area, although most of them are Christian Presbyterians. They often have sex, children and begin to live with their partner before the bridewealth payment occurs or even before being officially engaged (or *blokem* in Bislama).

According to the 2013 *Vanuatu Demographic and Health Survey* (VDHS)⁸, the median age at first sexual intercourse is 19.0 for women (aged 20–49 at the time of the survey) and 18.6 for men. The median age at first birth among female respondents aged 20–49 is 20.9. And the median age at which the respondent began living with her or his first spouse or partner is 20.8 for women and 23.8 for men (MoH *et al.* 2014: xvii, 87). At the time of the 2013 Vanuatu DHS, 68% of women and 60% of men aged 15–49 were currently in a union. But the survey shows that a substantial proportion of women (38%) and men (35%) currently in a union opt to live together rather than get married in a civil, religious or customary ceremony: 'living together' prevails among women aged 15–29 and among men aged 20–29⁹ (MoH *et al.* 2014: 82–83).

Most of the religious and customary marriages I attended between 2009 and 2018 in Seaside Tongoa, involved people in their thirties who were already living together and were parents of several children. The brides were thus already in charge of household chores, such as cooking, washing, cleaning and looking after kids. And the betrothed couples had proved, before the marriage and the bridewealth payment, their capacity to reproduce themselves¹⁰.

In Seaside Tongoa, the *kastom mared* is sometimes also a way for parents to make sure their daughters do not give birth to a *pikinini blong rod* (literally a 'child of the road': an

illegitimate child), in other words a child whose father is not clearly identified or does not want to care for him (Kelly 1999: 94; Widmer 2013). Faced with the growing number of *pikinini blong rod* in Seaside Tongoa, some parents agree to marry their daughter still nulliparous to avoid having one more mouth to feed if she gets pregnant. But in a general way, marriage does not (or no longer) mark the beginning of sexual and parental life in Seaside Tongoa. When the fiancés have children together, a payment is made, at the same time as the bridewealth payment, to integrate the couple's children into the groom's clan.

According to my interlocutors from Seaside Tongoa, the main purpose of the practice of bridewealth that takes place during the customary marriage is to separate the bride and her children from their former *nakamal* and to affiliate them with the groom's group (the primary principle of filiation is patrilineal). My interlocutors talk about the 'departure' of the woman from her native group and her integration with her husband's group. On Tongoa Island, women are buried in their husband's land, but when they live in Port-Vila, they are buried in the municipal cemetery. However, marriage does not create a total breakdown between a wife and her native *nakamal*. Concretely, if a woman is in conflict with her in-laws, she can ask her brothers for help. She may also visit her parents and participate in ceremonies in her native group, provided her husband agrees (see also Kelly 1999: 96-97).

Through their bridewealth marriage, women are considered essential to the strengthening or creation of what are called 'roads' (*rod* in Bislama), in other words links between people (and not only men) from different groups (Bolton 1999: 49; Jolly 1997[1994]: 117; Lind 2014: 87). In Seaside Tongoa, these social links can be used, for example, when a black magic attack is suspected. Linked to the close physical proximity of communities from different islands and the economic inequalities experienced by urban dwellers, fears and accusations of black magic attacks are very common in Port-Vila (Rio 2010; Lindstrom 2011). The 'roads' created by inter-island marriages serve to consult traditional healers from other islands living in Port-Vila (see Servy 2017a: 325). Thus, nowadays the inhabitants of seaside Tongoa do not get married customarily to start their conjugal, sexual and parental lives, but to integrate people (women and children) into the patriclan, to enhance their political participation and to build or strengthen social relations.

BRIDEWEALTH AND THE CHOICE OF SPOUSE

As the practice of bridewealth separates the bride from her former *nakamal* and affiliates her with the groom's clan, the choice of spouse is crucial for families who, for example, want to maintain or create social, economic or caregiving relationships with the spouses. The paramount chiefs of Tongoa Island and their representatives in Port-Vila are required to marry with *tawi* (or cross cousins and by extension any person with whom Ego can marry or joke) from their home island. Other people from Tongoa Island can in principle marry inside or outside their village or island, but outside their *nakamal*. However, island endogamy exists in Seaside Tongoa, even though people from various islands lived in Port-Vila. Moreover, the two most numerically important village communities of Seaside Tongoa, Itakoma and Matangi, also tend to build alliances together¹¹. A man in his twenties explained to me:

When a man from Tongoa Island comes into the world, he already has customary women (*kastom waef*). All the daughters of his uncles and aunts¹² are his *kastom waef*. He may marry the one of his generation or the one he has started dating (*mekem fren*). But out of respect for his parents, if they ask him to marry someone else, he must accept.

In her doctoral thesis, Susanna Katharine Kelly (1999: 93) suggests that the custom of *blokem* would correspond to an older practice, in which the families of two children, sometimes not yet born, agreed on a future union. In Seaside Tongoa, such arrangements were not mentioned to me. But the family's opinion remains paramount in the decision of young people to start or continue an intimate relationship.

In Tongoa Island, family choices could be motivated by the resolution of land disputes, the consolidation of relations between chiefs, or the desire that a woman follow her own mother's path (*rod*) by marrying in her mother's home village (for example, with her matrilineal cross cousin). Then it is said that the girl is replacing her mother (Kelly 1999: 92). However, in Port-Vila, other arguments are also put forward to justify family choices. A woman of Seaside Tongoa, about fifty years old, told me that she wanted to marry her daughter Leiwia with Pakoa, her brother's son who attended school in New Caledonia. She said:

This morning a man came to ask us if he could 'block' (*blokem*)¹³ Leiwia for his son. I think Leiwia knows him and they're already seeing each other (*mekem frend*). I didn't say anything because it's Leiwia's father who decides anyway. But I don't want him to 'block' her. I'd like her to get engaged with Pakoa, my brother's son. I explained to my brothers that if their son marries a woman from another island, they would never see the money that Pakoa will earn because he went to school in Nouméa. Children should not give their parents their full salary. But they have to give them part of it from time to time. And they have to participate financially in weddings. If Pakoa's wife is from another island and if she is bad (*nogud*), my brothers will never see the money. But for the moment, they have never come to 'block' Leiwia for their son, so the situation stays that way. [...] Me and my husband would like our daughter to be with a man from Tongoa Island. If we had several daughters, Leiwia could marry a man from another island. But she's our only daughter. So it's better if she's with a man from Tongoa Island, because she'll have to take care of us when we get old. I would like her to be with a man from the village of Itakoma to get her back to my village. But Leiwia's father is from the village of Euta. And he wants her to be with a man from his own village.

Bridewealth here serves as an investment in the future of the parents, particularly if the girl is related through blood. Leiwia's mother is keen to protect this future: it will be easier to do so if her daughter marries someone from Tongoa and particularly her nephew on her brother's side. Several of my interlocutors from Seaside Tongoa explained to me that it is important for their child (or grandchild) to marry or get engaged with a partner from their own island, or even from their own village, to ensure that they will have access to income¹⁴ and care when they get older. If their daughter marries a cross cousin (who is a nephew to them and therefore owes them respect according to the kinship system), then it will be easier for her to continue taking care of her parents, even if the bridewealth has been paid. The educational level or employment status of their child's potential partner are new selection criteria for parents living in urban areas, provided that the child's potential partner is judged likely to share his or her earnings with them. In addition, the mixing of men from Tongoa Island with women from other islands is considered by some of my interlocutors to lead to the weakening and physical decline of the inhabitants of Seaside Tongoa, in the same way as the consumption of imported food (see Servy 2017a: 220).

The patri- or matrilineal cousin, with whom a joking relationship is maintained, is the preferential partner. In Seaside Tongoa, many couples are composed of cross cousins of the first or second degree. However, young people are increasingly selecting their partners according to other criteria, such as feelings of love (see Servy 2013b). For example, Leiwia's parents accepted the proposal and allowed their daughter to live with the young man she had

chosen, despite Leiwia's mother's wish to marry her daughter with Pakoa. In another example, when I asked a man in his twenties if the mother of his two children is his *kastom waef*, he answered me:

She's not my *kastom waef*. But she's my *tawi*. In Port-Vila, we mix *kastom* and White people's ways of life (*fasin blo waet man*). According to the *kastom*, once you're engaged (*blokem*), you can't leave your woman, while the white people move from one woman to another. In Seaside Tongoa, there are many women now who have children of different men. Some even remain single and sell their bodies (*salem bodi*) (see Servy 2013a, 2020). Me, I didn't 'block' my girlfriend. But we had kids quickly because our families didn't want us to be together.

Thus, family choices are not always respected in Seaside Tongoa. Young people (including young women) are more autonomous in deciding who they have sex with, who they have children with and who they marry. They can pursue strategies to circumvent family choices (see below). If my interlocutor describes his practice as a 'mix' because he didn't marry the person he ought to have married (his *kastom waef*), his relationship with his classificatory cross cousin remains nevertheless compatible with the kinship system of his community. It should also be noted that in a customary marriage where the bride is not from Tongoa Island, she is adopted by one of the groom's uncles so that it still corresponds to a marriage between classificatory cross cousins. Of the eleven religious marriages I attended in the Presbyterian church of Seaside Tongoa on September 25, 2009, almost half of them were 'mixed marriages', in other words the fiancés were not both from Tongoa Island. Nevertheless, marriages by exchange of sisters are also contracted in the community thus insuring that bridewealth stays in the family and can be compensated readily.

If the men and women of Seaside Tongoa express autonomy by choosing their partners, family approvals remain very important in the selection of spouses and in the conduct of engagement rituals, such as bridewealth payments. While marriages in Port-Vila are less and less often linked to the resolution of intra-insular or intra-village conflicts (and more and more to feelings of love), they still create or strengthen 'roads' between families along which goods, money, caregiving practices and knowledge circulate.

GETTING MARRIED WITH BRIDEWEALTH: A CASE STUDY

Before analyzing the relationship between bridewealth and contraception, it is important to remind ourselves of the mechanics and ideologies of bridewealth in Port-Vila. As is reported in the literature elsewhere in Melanesia, the mechanics involve the presentation of gifts and counter gifts, while the ideologies put emphasis on the creation or strengthening of relational network. In this section, I am using the example of a marriage by exchange of sisters that I witnessed in 2009 in Port-Vila to illustrate my points. These two unions¹⁵ concerned four inhabitants of Seaside Tongoa: John and Dora on the one hand, Carl and Flora on the other hand. They were all from the villages of Matangi and Itakoma. These four people were about 30 years old and each bride had already given birth to two children. The two alliances constituted, according to the families concerned, an 'exchange of sisters' in that Flora and John, as well as Dora and Carl, used sibling terms to address each other (Figure 1). I followed this marriage by exchange of sisters, positioning myself on the side of Dora and Carl's relatives.

Of the eleven couples united by God on September 25, 2009, John, Dora, Carl and Flora were among the few to have a customary marriage with bridewealth organized by their families on a date close to the religious celebration. For people from Tongoa Island, customary and

religious rituals should ideally take place in the same period of time (Kelly 1999: 97). However, during my fieldwork in Seaside Tongoa, these ceremonies were not necessarily organized in the same month, or even the same year. The time gap between religious and customary ceremonies is explained by the time it takes to gather the help and support from many relatives willing to offer money, artefacts, food, kava¹⁶ and kill several of their cows or pigs for the presentation of bridewealth (see Kelly 1999: 94-98).

In Seaside Tongoa, and Vanuatu, customary marriages require the exchange of a considerable quantity of goods and the mobilization of extended social networks, from both sides, through numerous rounds of prestations and counter prestations, including but not limited to the bridewealth. Before the customary marriage by exchange of sisters took place, John, Dora, Carl, Flora and their families received money and goods from hundreds of men and women (including some who did not live in Port-Vila) who had themselves received help from their own affines and consanguines to make their contributions more meaningful (see Kelly 1999: 284). Note that these first rounds of prestations and counter prestations are not part of the bridewealth payment. While some of the goods and money collected were used for the bridewealth payment itself, the 'gifts' given to the mother of the bride (called 'mother's milk') and for the leaving of the couple's children, most were not. Other goods, for example, were used to feed the guests or were given as wedding gifts to the bride (see Servy 2017: 172-174).

When preparing for a customary marriage, the closest members of matrilineal and patrilineal families (fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts) usually bring the most money and goods. For example, two of Carl's classificatory fathers gave 10,000 vatus (76€) and 30,000 vatus (229€, which corresponds to the monthly minimum wage) to prepare the payment of Flora and her children aged 8 and 13. However, the quantity of goods often also depends on social status, financial means and personal relationships: a rich person with a high 'taetel' (customary name) must give more than a poor person without ranking 'taetel'.

The goods and money received, as well as the names and villages of origin of the donors, are recorded in notebooks belonging to the groom or the bride. According to Dora's notebook, for example, 172 people made a contribution to help prepare for her customary wedding ceremony. Of these 172 female and male donors, 79 offered money, but few of them brought only banknotes. In addition to the 130,100 vatus (993€) collected, 81 mats, 54 pieces of fabric, 32 island dresses, 3 cows, 2 pigs, 4 bags of sweet potatoes, 1 bag of taros, 4 bags of rice, 7 kg of chicken wings and dozens of plates, dishes, basins and glasses were also collected. Such notebooks allow their owners to return what they have received when donors organize their own ceremonies and call upon them to contribute to it. Some donors have sometimes never met the groom and bride before, but know their parents or grandparents. Through these customary marriages with bridewealth payments, the relatives of the bride or the groom pass on new relationships of mutual assistance and obligations to their children or grandchildren, while displaying their social and economic status.

After mobilizing relatives and friends and collecting their contributions, a distribution of food brought by the bride's family to the groom's family took place in Seaside Tongoa on 23 September 2009, one day before the bridewealth payment. In this case of marriage by sister exchange, it was a reciprocal process. While singing and dancing, Flora's relatives brought a cow that had just been killed, taros, yams and cassava to Carl's family. Then, Dora's family went to John's relatives place and gave them equivalent goods. These gifts from the brides' family to the groom's relatives did not include money, mats, dresses or pieces of fabric (see Kelly 1999: 95, 293). The two families gave only a portion of their food.

The next day, John's relatives went to Dora's family place to 'pay' (*pem* in Bislama) for the bride and her children. The two fiancés were present but were not at the heart of the action. They mixed with the crowd and sometimes even were left out by their relatives¹⁷.

While the two families were on either side of the goods on the ground, a man from John's *nakamal* described in Bislama the composition of the three sets of gifts and announced for whom they were intended¹⁸. Dora's family accepted gifts from John's *nakamal*, but some members criticized their size. In this exchange of sisters between people from two villages with strong social ties (because of their geographical proximity and a long history of alliances), the quantity of goods involved was less substantial than expected by some. When both families are from Tongoa Island, less money and more livestock tend to be offered in Seaside Tongoa (see also Bowie 1995: 18). However, the quantity of gifts depends not only on the bride's origin, but also on the intensity of the social ties the groom's relatives want to create or maintain with the bride's native *nakamal* or her native island. It is also important to note that in Seaside Tongoa, the woman's age, and her marital, sexual or childbearing history were not presented as factors influencing the amount of bridewealth payment¹⁹.

The paternal uncle of Dora thanked the visitors who had come to 'pay' her and announced that she would be taken to her husband's *nakamal* the next day, at the end of the religious ceremony (see Servy 2017a: 172-175). A couple of hours later, John's family came back to pick up the goods and the money for 'paying' Flora and her children. Carl's relatives had planned to give more ceremonial gifts than John's relatives. They had more money, mats, pieces of fabric, dresses, animals, fruits and vegetables available to 'pay' Flora and her children. But they decided to give exactly the same quantity and type of goods, not to 'wipe out the debt' but to 'balance' the exchange (Godelier 2008 [1996]: 61). In this marriage by exchange of sisters, the payments therefore compensated each of the two *nakamal* for the loss of a woman and her children born out of marriage.

Note that bridewealth is not only a male affair in Seaside Tongoa. I have previously shown that women are involved in both the preparation and the payment process. Moreover, the husband does not 'pay' the bridewealth alone, even if he has the financial capacity to do it. One reason for this is that while the religious or civil marriage reflects an agreement between two individuals, the customary marriage is mainly an alliance between two social groups. An 85-year-old female resident of Seaside Tongoa told me that, several decades ago, a woman who was engaged in extramarital relationships had been judged by a customary court. During the trial, the old men of the husband's clan told the unfaithful woman:

We've paid (*pem*) your vagina (*tabu pat*) for Perry. We've paid the right to use your vagina to give birth to Perry's children. You must not be unfaithful.

During my fieldwork, I did not hear such strong statements. At a customary trial for adultery held in August 2012 in Seaside Tongoa, several participants even stated that if the unfaithful wife had only cheated on her husband once, no one would have blamed her. They also suggested that if he was violent with her or did not give her enough money it could justify her cheating on him. However, the participants blamed the woman for cheating on her husband for several years, for not taking good care of the house and for not having yet given birth to a child. If my interlocutors did not talk about the acquisition of productive and reproductive capacities of the wife by her husband's clan, they exercised or sought to exercise control over her work, her sexuality and her fertility. What can we make of all this? It is clear that the ideology of exchange between social groups that is so often mentioned by Ni-Vanuatu when they talk about bridewealth is central. But it is just as clear that it co-exists with a concern for the reproduction of lineages that is equally central to that marriage practice. These two cases led me to examine the link between bridewealth and women's use of contraceptive methods in Seaside Tongoa.

CONSTRAINTS ON WOMEN'S CONTRACEPTION USE

We have seen that in Seaside Tongoa couples often marry after having demonstrated their ability to have children. Having several children is a social obligation in the community, and more generally in Vanuatu. According to the 2013 *Demographic and Health Survey* (DHS), the total fertility rate in Vanuatu is 4.2 births per woman: 4.7 for rural women and 3.3 for urban women (MoH *et al.* 2014: xvii). However, pregnancies that occur too early, too late or too frequently during the woman's reproductive cycle are considered to be bad by the inhabitants of Seaside Tongoa because of health risks or socio-economic consequences for the people of this poor community. Several family planning methods are available in Vanuatu: female and male sterilization, the birth control pill, injectable contraceptives, intra-uterine devices (or IUD), male and female condoms, contraceptive implant (since 2014), the lactational amenorrhea method, periodic abstinence, and rhythm and withdrawal methods. Among women living with their spouse or partner at the time of the 2013 Vanuatu DHS, 49% were currently using a contraceptive method: 37% reported using a 'modern method' (including 11% female sterilization, 11% birth control pills, and 10% injectable contraceptives) and 12% a 'traditional method' (7% rhythm and 5% withdrawal). Male sterilization (0.6%) and female condoms (0%) are the least used methods. The use of contraception varies with urban–rural residence, education and age. For example, women in urban areas are more likely to use 'modern method' (43%) than rural women (35%), partly because of a lack of accessibility and availability of health and family planning services in remote areas. Use of 'modern contraceptive methods', particularly IUDs and injectable contraceptives, is slightly higher among women with a secondary education than those with a primary education who are more likely to use female sterilization. Birth control pills and injectable contraceptives are more popular among younger women, whereas older women tend to use female sterilization. But male condoms are the first method used by sexually active young women not currently in a union (MoH *et al.* 2014: 66-69).

Annie Walter (1988: 82-86) notes that in the 1980s, estrogen-progestin contraception was not widely used in Vanuatu because of its side effects. The preferred contraceptive methods were periodic abstinence (during pregnancy and until the child was weaned), final sterilization with herbal preparations and abortion by mechanical means or by local pharmacopoeia. Before the arrival of Westerners in the Pacific islands, infanticide and the periodic separation of women and men into distinct houses were also effective means of birth control (Codrington 1957: 229; Harrisson 1937: 42, 266; Speiser 1996[1923]: 253-257, 267; Walter 1988: 82-86). But the influence of missionaries and colonial authorities, the end of wars, the destruction of men's houses, the shortening of breastfeeding periods, the prohibition of polygamy and recent conceptions of a woman's body as belonging to her husband have all led to an increase in intimate contacts between spouses and a decrease in periodic abstinence (Dureau 2001: 240-242; Jolly 2001: 196). In Western Solomon Islands, Christine Dureau (2001: 239) notes that, in the past, women did not need the agreement of their partner or of the medical staff to abort or use a contraceptive method but that, under the influence of Christian missionaries and colonial authorities, women have lost their 'reproductive autonomy'.

According to the 2013 Vanuatu DHS, 24% of women currently in a union who do not want any more children or who want to wait two or more years before having another child are not using contraception (MoH *et al.* 2014: 97). The main reason reported by these women is fear of side effects (20%). Other reasons given for not intending to use contraception include health concerns (16%), the respondent's opposition (16%), the husband's or partner's opposition (8%, which is a relatively low rate), the respondent being subfecund or infecund (7%), the respondent feeling that contraception interferes with the body's normal process or the fact the respondent is menopausal or has had a hysterectomy (5%). Only a small proportion of women cited a lack of knowledge of methods, a lack of access or cost as the main reason for not intending to use family planning (MoH *et al.* 2014: 76-77). The 2013 Vanuatu DHS gives us a general idea of

what impedes the use of contraceptive methods in the country. However, the report provides little detail on these reasons and on the background characteristics of respondents. In particular, we do not know whether bridewealth was paid.

During my research in Seaside Tongoa, I only saw a direct link between bridewealth and contraception in the particular case of female sterilization by tubal ligation. If a woman wants to be sterilized at the Port-Vila Central Hospital (located next to Seaside Tongoa), she must obtain the prior written agreement of a parent (usually her father) or her husband. This is consistent with a Christian view of control of female fertility in which control is handed from father to husband. However, this does not take into account reproductive interests of the clan as a whole. The hospital does not care whether the bridewealth has been paid, but my interlocutors from Seaside Tongoa do. A woman in her twenties who had given birth to three children by caesarean section explained to me that the doctors urged her to be sterilized to avoid complications during another delivery. It is her father who signed the authorization to do the surgery because she was not married and, more importantly to her relatives, because her boyfriend had not ‘paid’ her and therefore did not have any rights in a decision that would permanently affect her physical ability to have children. However, the Port-Vila Central Hospital does not require a copy of marriage certificate. One of my male interlocutors from Seaside Tongoa told me that he signed the agreement without being married to his partner and without any bridewealth having been given. He explained to me that he asked the mother of his two children to undergo tubal ligation, because in view of the high cost of living in Port-Vila, he did not want any more children²⁰. He also told me that he did not have the right to ask this of her, according to their relatives, because he had not ‘paid’ her. Therefore, his partner’s family does not know that she underwent the operation. The hospital requires only the husband’s agreement for such operation which suggests a Christian view of the control of female fertility at the couple’s level. However, my interlocutors from Seaside Tongoa reinforced for me the point that bridewealth is paid by all the members of the husband’s clan; this clearly indicates a representation of female fertility control at a more collective level.

In Seaside Tongoa, the payment of bridewealth is considered only when allowing men to authorize or ask their wife to undergo permanent sterilization. But the use of other contraceptive methods may also be restricted by the control men want to have over the fertility of their sexual partners²¹, and this is independent of whether a Christian or customary marriage has already taken place and bridewealth given. The main reasons given by the inhabitants of Seaside Tongoa for the even violent control of women’s usage of contraceptives includes God’s desire for every human being to reproduce, the need for men with ranking ‘taetel’ to have children and the fear of female infidelity which is perceived to be facilitated by the use of modern contraceptive methods. Several of my female interlocutors told me that they had been beaten by their boyfriends because they used contraceptive pills or injections without their consent. For example, when I innocently asked one of the women in my host family about the origin of the incision marks on her forearm, she explained, with a big smile, that her boyfriend had wounded her with a knife after learning that she was using birth control pills (see Servy 2017b).

Giving birth is also viewed as an investment in the future in a context of inter-generational solidarity and as a means to create and maintain links between groups through adoptions and marriages. As I have said, having or raising children is a social obligation in Seaside Tongoa, but it can also be an individual or couple’s strategy: several young people told me that they did not use any contraceptive method because they desired a baby in order to formalize their relationship of which their relatives did not approve. Once the child is born, it may be more difficult for relatives to separate the couple, because of the care, especially financial care, needed by the baby. Not using contraceptive methods can also be a strategy of only one of the partners who hopes that a pregnancy will change her or his lover’s behavior. For example, some young men try to make their girlfriends pregnant to prevent them from roaming (*wokbaot*) and

to force them to stay at home to look after their baby. A woman in her fifties told me that getting pregnant is also a means to prevent men's infidelities, because some men start dating another woman when their wives no longer give birth to children.

Moreover, there are people who do not use any contraceptive methods even if they do not want to have children. Reasons vary and include: unplanned or forced sex, drug and alcohol abuse, for the sake of sexual pleasure, for fear of side effects, because of lack of knowledge about using contraceptives or of access to them (because of unavailability shortage, shame about asking or the reticence of medical staff). My research in Port-Vila revealed that sexual and reproductive health educators presented most contraceptive methods, including pills, as accessible to young women without children. However, it appears that some medical staff refused to deliver contraceptive pills or injections to young nulliparous women. A young woman explained to me that when she was 18 years old, she saw a nurse who refused to provide her with contraception on the grounds that she was too young and did not yet have a child. A year later, she gave birth to a baby girl and started taking birth control pills provided by the same nurse. Similarly, several of my interlocutors from Seaside Tongoa told me that modern contraceptives should be used exclusively by mothers who want to space births out. The 2013 Vanuatu DHS indicates that a very high proportion (79%) of women aged 15-19 have never used contraception and only 16% of women aged 15-49 first used a contraceptive method at a time when they had no children (MoH *et al* 2014: 70).

Contraceptives are considered dangerous not only for women's fecundity, but also for their health and for their foetus and partner's well-being. For example, some of my interlocutors from Seaside Tongoa thought that using pills or injections could damage the uterus and make women barren. For others, condoms and tubal ligation can lead to cervical cancer and IUDs can cause tuberculosis. Others thought that using contraceptive methods makes their sexual partner sick because pills and injections solidify the flow of blood, or that contraceptive methods lead to giving birth to disabled babies.

Thus, I can say that the only case in which bridewealth directly influenced the use of contraceptive methods in the Seaside Tongoa area is that of tubal ligation. Regarding the use of other methods, several interdependent factors seem to be at play, including the control men often want to have on the fertility of their sexual partners, the social obligation of having or raising children, the strategies of individuals or couples, the reticence of medical staff and the fear of side effects.

CONCLUSION

On the one hand, this paper addresses the question of why people nowadays get customarily married in Port-Vila and why they pay the bridewealth, sometimes after the couple have been living together for years. In Vanuatu, anthropologists have often presented bridewealth payments as establishing or strengthening 'roads' between clans on the one hand, and allowing access to, if not the acquisition of, 'rights over women's labour, sexuality and fertility' on the other (Jolly 1997[1994]:117). However, in the contemporary urban context, it seems that this second function is losing importance. Indeed, I have shown that marriage and the payment of bridewealth no longer marks the beginning of conjugal, sexual and parental life in Seaside Tongoa. Nowadays, many couples live together and have children without being married. Women often perform household chores, work (mainly cook) at gatherings of their partner's clan and share the money they earn with them without having been 'paid' by their *nakamal*. If the people of Seaside Tongoa continue to marry customarily and pay the bridewealth, it is to separate the bride and her children from her natal clan and to affiliate them with the groom's clan. The customary name that the bride receives, immediately after the payment of

bridewealth, allows her to raise her social status and to enhance her political participation in the groom's *nakamal*. In addition, customary marriages and the organization of wedding ceremonies with bridewealth payments build or strengthen social relations within clans and between families. Women are therefore valued for strengthening the ties between groups, especially in this highly multi-ethnic urban context, and bridewealth helps to solidify and reinforce these ties and, thus, the value of women.

On the other hand, this paper argues against international development discourses that depict bridewealth as impeding women's freedom, including their reproductive autonomy. I find that such representations of bridewealth are reductions and fail to consider the many other factors that shape women's use of contraception, pregnancy and childbearing. Although the weight of family decisions remains important in Seaside Tongoa, men and women seem more autonomous in choosing their partners, starting to live together, having children and organizing their marriages, including bridewealth ones. These choices are often guided by love as well as economic and care concerns. An increasing number of young mothers remain single and a growing number of children are fatherless. In Seaside Tongoa, many men exercise or seek to exercise control over their partner's work, sexuality and fertility. However, this is independent of whether a Christian or customary marriage has already taken place and bridewealth given. We have seen that bridewealth payment is only one among several interdependent factors that influence women's contraceptive use in the community, including the fear of side effects and the reticence of medical staff. While this practice is strongly condemned at the international level, it is therefore doubtful that the revocation of bridewealth payments will lead to an increase in women's freedom in Vanuatu.

In Seaside Tongoa, the bridewealth amount does not depend on the woman's age or reproductive history, but on the intensity of the social bonds that the two clans or even the two islands want to create or maintain, especially in a climate of fear linked to black magic attacks. In this context, bridewealth payments are thus mainly used to create protective and supportive relationships between social groups, rather than to give rights over women's productive and reproductive capacities. Bridewealth is taken into account in cases of female sterilization by tubal ligation, because the operation permanently affects a woman's ability to have children and having children is a social obligation for a couple. But we have seen that most couples have already had children or even completed their reproductive lives by the time bridewealth is paid. The assertion that bridewealth affects women's rights to the reproductive capacities of their bodies does not take into consideration how bridewealth marriages are established and develop locally. The issue of women's reproductive autonomy in Vanuatu should therefore be situated and understood by development organizations within a complex of contexts and relationships.

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NOTES

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- ¹ Laboratoire Population, Environnement, Développement (Aix Marseille Univ, IRD, LPED, Marseille, France).
- ² Between 2009 and 2018, I did twenty months fieldwork in Vanuatu. I conducted ethnographic research on various topics including socioeconomic relations, health issues and more recently gender based violence. My PhD thesis analyses the relations between global and local forces at work in the context of the prevention of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) in Port-Vila. During my PhD fieldwork, I shared my time between a poor area of the capital named Seaside Tongoa and the organizations working in sexual and reproductive health in Port-Vila, such as the Wan Smolbag Theater and Vanuatu Family Health Association. However, these organizations run prevention programs concerning not only STIs but also contraceptive methods. That is why I collected data on family planning. In addition, I undertook two consultancy assignments for the United Nations, one on maternal health (UNDP and Servy 2013) and the other on condom use (UNFPA and Servy 2014).
- ³ <http://data.un.org/en/iso/vu.html>
- ⁴ The term 'community' is used here as a translation of the term Bislama *komuniti*. It is used by the inhabitants of Seaside Tongoa to designate themselves and the place where they live, but it does not mean that they constitute a closed or homogeneous social group (see Servy 2010).
- ⁵ I translate *kastom* here as 'custom', but Lissant Bolton (2003:189) has shown that this Bislama concept does not really equate to custom or tradition, because the inhabitants of Vanuatu identify practices as part of the *kastom*, whereas they did not exist before colonization. The *kastom* is what illustrates, shows the belonging of a person to a place.
- ⁶ On Tongoa Island, each of the fourteen villages has about ten patrilineal and patri-virilocal *nakamal*. During my PhD fieldwork, the Seaside Tongoa area was inhabited by people from only five of the fourteen villages. But most of the *nakamal* from the two most numerically important village communities of Seaside Tongoa, Itakoma and Matangi, were represented (see Servy 2017: 138-143).
- ⁷ In Seaside Tongoa, people are given names every time they change their status, for example, at first haircut or penile sub-incision ceremonies (see Servy 2017: 224-228).
- ⁸ The 2013 *Vanuatu Demographic and Health Survey* is based on interviews with 2,508 women aged 15 to 49 years and 1,333 men aged 15-54.
- ⁹ I assume that more couples 'live together' without being married in the city than in rural areas. But the 2013 DHS report does not provide the marital status of respondents according to their place of residence. At the time of writing, the Vanuatu National Statistics Office still has not given me access to the dataset that would allow me to confirm my hypothesis.
- ¹⁰ Writing about New-Caledonia, Christine Salomon (2000: 327-328) explains that marriage is only celebrated there after a probationary period during which the young people live together and give birth to one or more children.
- ¹¹ In Tongoa Island, the members of these two villages (which are actually one, Selembanga) also tended to marry each other.
- ¹² According to the typology of kinship terminologies of Robert H. Lowie, the inhabitants of Seaside Tongoa, and the Shepherd Islands in general (Pakoa 1987: 3), use a classification system called bifurcate merging. Ego uses the

same terms of address and reference for his father and his paternal uncle, while he calls and designates his maternal uncle in a different way (Ben Hounet 2009: 35-36).

¹³ I literally translate the term *blokem* by 'to block', but it means here more 'to be engaged'.

¹⁴ It should be noted that Seaside Tongoa is considered as one of the poorest communities in Port-Vila. Most of the inhabitants have unskilled and poorly paid jobs. Since August 2012, the minimum wage in Vanuatu for 176 hours of work per month is 30,000 vatus (229€). However, due to part-time or informal employment, some employees are unable to reach this amount. Men from Seaside Tongoa are frequently recruited as construction workers, night watchmen, prison guards or seasonal workers in New Zealand. Women, on the other hand, are often employed in the service sector as maids, cashiers or restaurant cooks.

¹⁵ During the twenty months of fieldwork I carried out in Port-Vila, I observed and participated in many customary marriages with bridewealth payments. But it is in 2009 that I collected most of my data on the marriage with bridewealth by exchange of sisters that I will present here.

¹⁶ Kava is a narcotic drink made from the roots of the wild pepper plant (*Piper methysticum*). It is sold in town in kava bars.

¹⁷ The similarities between customary marriage rituals and customary reconciliation ceremonies in sentencing for sexual offences that I observed in Seaside Tongoa should be noted here. The raped woman is usually not present during rituals aimed at restoring harmony between her relatives and the aggressor's family (see Servy 2017b), just as the bride stand back during the bridewealth payment.

¹⁸ First, for the 'mother's milk' of the bride, John's relatives gave to Dora's mother one small pig previously slaughtered, two cassava bunches, one bunch of bananas, one kava bunch, one bunch of sugar cane, one pack of ten mats, three dresses, two pieces of fabric and 10,000 vatus (76€). Then, for Dora's leaving (bridewealth payment), they offered her paternal grandmother named Leikav (her father and paternal grandfather were already dead) one slaughtered heifer, one bunch of sugar cane, six taros, two cassava bunches, two bunches of bananas, one kava bunch, one pack of ten mats, three dresses, two pieces of fabric and 10,000 vatus (76€). Finally, for the leaving of the couple's children, Marie and Joe, their great-grandmother was offered one pack of ten mats, two dresses, two pieces of fabric and 10,000 vatus (76€). The purpose of these payments was, on the one hand, to compensate Dora's mother for feeding and raising her and, on the other, to compensate her native *nakamal* for the loss of several members – a woman and her two children born before marriage (see also Kelly 1999: 96-97).

¹⁹ In August 2018, a man from Ifira Island explained to me that his family is going to 'pay' his fiancée from Seaside Tongoa 80,000 vatus (611€), even though his girl-friend is in her forties, she has already had four children with another man, and she is menopausal, because it is the standard amount. After Vanuatu's independence, the National Council of Chiefs set the maximum amount of bridewealth payment at 80,000 vatus. Nevertheless, in 2005, the Secretary General of this Council announced the revocation of the ceiling and said he wanted to stop the use of cash in customary ceremonies (Jolly 2015: 63).

²⁰ In Vanuatu, male sterilization is practically non-existent (MoH *et al.* 2014: 66-69).

²¹ However, we have seen that at a national level, according to the 2013 Vanuatu DHS, the husband's or partner's opposition is not one of the main reasons given for not intending to use contraception (MoH *et al.* 2014: 76-77).