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*Women and Marriage
in Kpelle Society*



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P R E F A C E

This book examines the ways in which economic and political opportunities for men and women influence marriage patterns among the Kpelle of Liberia. To protect those who might not want themselves used as examples, I have changed the names of all the people I discuss in Fuama Chiefdom and have slightly altered the circumstances of anecdotes that might reveal someone's identity.

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C.H.B.

A NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION

Transcriptions of Kpelle words in this book follow the standard orthography worked out by William Welmers (1962, 1971). Except in the case of proper names, I have included marks that indicate tonal quality or nasalization for the sake of accuracy. Two paired consonants pronounced as single consonants in Kpelle, and five special symbols with their approximate English equivalents, are explained below:

- kp these two letters are pronounced as one consonant in Kpelle, with a sound approximating the "kp" in "crackpot" said quickly
- gb another single consonant in Kpelle, with a sound approximating the "gb" in "tugboat" said quickly
- ɓ this can be approximated by pronouncing the letter "b" implosively, like a cork popping out of a bottle
- ɣ this sound, produced in the back of the throat, is similar to the "ch" in the German word "ach," but is said with less friction
- ŋ this sound is similar to the "n" in the word "sing"
- ɛ this sound is similar to the "e" in the word "get"
- ɔ this sound is similar to the first syllable of the word "awful"

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In examining what marriage means to rural African women, we are confronted by an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, ethnographers have observed that African legal systems commonly give rights in women's productive and reproductive services to fathers, husbands, brothers, and other male relatives. On the other hand, major deviations from these legal norms occur: in some societies, for example the Nuer (Gough 1971), over half the women of marriageable age are not under any man's legal control. To explain this breach between norms and reality, we might hypothesize that women resent the system that subordinates them to men and try to evade its obligations. Yet many African women are just as conservative as men in trying to preserve the institutions that give control of women's services to men and older women. During my fieldwork among the Kpelle of Liberia, I heard bitter complaints from older women about the breakdown of marriage and filial obligation (see also Gibbs 1960, 1963).

As this book will show, Kpelle women do not see this difference between norms and practices as a contradiction. Rather, they see both norms and practices as readily reconcilable aspects of a more general "wealth-in-people" system, which binds people to their superiors in ties of marriage, clientship, and filial obligation (see Chapter 3). I will argue that all people, men as well as women, try to sever their own ties with superiors when possible, but try to keep subordinates bound to them in ties of obligation.¹

1. It is beyond the scope of this book to do a cross-cultural survey that documents the patterns I discuss for the Kpelle in a systematic and exhaustive way throughout West Africa or Africa as a whole. Many ethnographers have mentioned

Rural African women's economic roles are closely related to their marital options and constraints. Both J. Goody and Huntington have criticized Boserup's (1970) argument that because of their dominant roles in production, African women are traditionally highly independent, mobile, and able to accumulate wealth and status on their own. Goody (1973:46) downplays the importance of African women's contribution to agriculture, viewing the overall system of socioeconomic stratification as the most important factor in assessing patterns of marriage, inheritance, and female status. Huntington (1975) even questions the extent to which women control their roles in production. She claims that in fact men dominate both traditional female farming systems and modern markets, and make these institutions serve their own interests. The main vehicle for this economic subordination of women is marriage. As Huntington (1975: 1007) notes, the status of women in rural African societies generally bears little relation to the amount of food they produce, because their efforts eventually line their husbands' pockets: "In many of these African societies, women's farming is the source of whatever wealth there is, and, despite women's rights in land tenure, men control women and women's production through their subordination in marriage, much as peasants are the traditionally subordinated producers of wealth for landbased aristocrats." Clearing the way for a new model of African women's status, Huntington (1975: 1011) argues that we "must take into account the past and present economic structure of the societies. Such a model would include . . . all that is summed up in the phrase 'the traditional role of women' and . . . the opportunity structure each particular attempt at modernization creates for the women in those societies."

This study provides such a model, linking female productive and sexual services to opportunity structures in traditional and modern contexts of Kpelle society.² I argue that because Kpelle women and

similar patterns of stratification and marriage in their descriptions of other African societies; I draw attention to some of these parallels to show that the Kpelle case is not an isolated one. My own study will hopefully stimulate a refinement of the wealth-in-people concept as it applies—or does not apply—to other African societies. I hope it will also stimulate discussions of variations in African social stratification patterns, and of the conditions under which particular patterns emerge.

2. My use of the word "model" in this book does not imply a mathematical construct with predictive power, but rather a general analytical framework. Although I

marriage are the political and economic tools of men in the traditional system, women as a group find it hard to advance in the wider society. However, they view their children—especially the older ones—along with other members of domestic groups, as resources rather than impediments: as people whose labor will lighten their burdens and offer them security in their old age. Hence, women in traditional contexts *can* achieve some degree of independence as they grow older, by using the services of the young.³

Modernization has provided new opportunities for Kpelle women to acquire independence and prestige. Where cash cropping is possible or wage labor opportunities are available, women can remain unmarried because cash from marketing or from wage-earning lovers allows them to hire farm labor, pay house taxes, and buy household necessities themselves, a pattern noted as well by studies in other parts of Africa.⁴ But even these women still want their children to support them, and to marry spouses who will contribute to their support. In this way Kpelle women achieve the maximum freedom to make their own decisions, but still hold on to the security of the traditional ideal.

Recent studies of women's lives have sometimes lumped women into a single homogeneous group, perhaps seeking to demonstrate female solidarity and camaraderie in the face of male oppression. But women are people who occupy a number of status positions, many of which they share with men. For the Kpelle, the most sig-

have set up the comparison in terms of modern and traditional areas, the terminology may imply a false dichotomy for three reasons. First, the term "traditional" does not imply a timeless, untouched society. Outside influences have had considerable impact on African institutions for centuries. Second, the two kinds of economic and political organization I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5 do not imply a dual organization in which both systems operate autonomously. National institutions influence those in the hinterland and vice versa. (See, for example, Wolf 1957, J. Goody 1967, and Meillassoux 1972 on the important relations between modern and traditional sectors.) Third, the terms "modern" and "traditional" are of course relative. Haindii and Doblí Island, the modern towns, are not fully modernized even by Liberian standards, but they do have more access to modern transportation, markets, and jobs than Digei, which relies more on subsistence agriculture.

3. Obviously some women are also "young people," and some men are also "older people." For the sake of verbal facility, I hope the reader will indulge my occasional references to "women and the young," "men and older people," and so on.

4. This study deals in part with marital instability, but treats it as a manifestation of a larger process of change. I am not trying to explain why Kpelle marriage is more or less stable than marriage in other African societies; I am merely looking at marriage patterns within Kpelle society, and their relationship to larger changes in the society as a whole.

nificant status positions other than sex are age, lineage membership, possession of children, residence (modern versus traditional areas), and wealth. Kpelle women may find it in their interests to unite with other women at times, but they may just as easily find it in their interests to unite with male agnates against rival lineages, or with other old people against power plays by young upstarts. Moreover, women who have older children or wealth or who live in a modern area may take more risks than women with more limited means of support. To analyze the ways Kpelle women and men use all available resources to their own advantage, especially in conjugal and domestic situations, is the primary aim of this book.

I did most of the research for this study during five weeks in the summer of 1973 and eleven months in 1974. In 1978 I returned to my field site for a brief visit to check some details and catch up on some case histories. I began learning the Kpelle language before leaving for the field, using the excellent tapes and grammar prepared by William Welmers. When I got to Liberia I continued Kpelle lessons with native speakers, but found I still had to rely on interpreters for interviews, especially with women, few of whom had continued their education long enough to learn English, the national language taught in public schools.

I lived in Haindii, the headquarters of Fuama Chiefdom, in a house with my husband, who was also doing anthropological fieldwork, and a Peace Corps volunteer who taught at the local school. Most of my work was conducted there. I frequently visited the town of Doblí Island, just across the St. Paul River, and once every two months in 1974 I spent five or six days in Digei, a small town 25 miles up-country by footpath. To visit Digei, my husband and I and our assistants chartered a Piper Cub plane in Monrovia, and landed on the airstrip built by the Lutheran mission. We rented one room in a zinc-roofed house, cooked on a gas burner, and ate local rice and canned food we brought from Monrovia. When we left Digei, we walked seven miles with our equipment and bedding to Kelebe, a small town at the end of a new unpaved road, and rode back to Haindii by taxi, the most common means of public transportation.

Since I was going to be conversing with women much of the time,

I needed a female assistant, so I hired a woman about eighteen years old. She had completed the eighth grade and spoke English very well. Her knowledge of the people in the community was valuable, but I soon found that for several reasons she was not a good interpreter or diplomatic mediator for me. My status was rather low in the first place because I was a female, and lower yet because I was young and childless. Having a female assistant even younger than I did not help. Not only did men of status consider her far beneath them, but many women were impatient with her as well; like many young women in Haindii she had lovers, so married women did not trust her with their husbands and did not speak freely with her. Hence, I began a search for an additional assistant.

My second assistant, a man of about thirty-five, had a high school education. He commanded good salaries from his employers, mostly other anthropologists, and used his earnings to support his wife and children, whom he brought with him to Haindii, and to dress well. All these attributes gave him status among the people we worked with and also seemed to confer more status on me. Although he was a stranger to the community, he was not seen as a threat, since he had no competing loyalties and no stake in local political maneuvers. Thanks to his patience, humor, and tact, even normally reticent women opened up readily to him, and I owe many of my best interviews to his skill. As it turned out, I had an ideal pair of assistants. I kept the young woman to work with census data and to provide information on local events and people, and I benefited from the man's status and diplomacy.

My basic purpose was to compare Kpelle marriage patterns in two areas of Fuama Chiefdom, one modern and one traditional. Haindii and Doblí Island, the modern towns, had good transportation, jobs, and markets; Digei, the traditional town, was in a more remote area. I spent most of my time on a census of all the inhabitants of the three towns, a total population of 1,302 residents in 1974. The census was conducted primarily through informants. At first I tried going from house to house or inviting people to my house to record information. But when I checked the information given me by suspicious residents with that of several close informants, many discrepancies appeared. This happened primarily for

two reasons. One was that the Kpelle regard information as a highly valuable resource, and guard it closely. The other was that marital status, my central focus, proved to be a particularly touchy and ambiguous topic. Women consistently tried to construe it to their own advantage to avoid antagonizing men to whom they were not legally "turned over" (married).⁵ These women knew their partners would be angry with them for telling me they were not married, because other men might learn of this and would lose their fear of adultery fines. Even my closest friend told me at first that she was married, describing the occasion of her marriage at great length—where it was performed, who came, what was said, and so on. Only later did she confess that she was not really married. Thus I decided my time would be more economically spent using anonymous informants. Though I often questioned residents directly when I knew them well enough, I used several informants for census data on everyone in all three towns, and I cross-checked the data many times. This method undoubtedly excluded some people and yielded some incorrect information, especially in Haindii and Doblí Island, which had more mobile populations, but I feel that I obtained greater accuracy this way than by relying exclusively on the residents themselves.

Though the census, household, and economic data were collected over a period of eight or nine months, I naturally thought of more variables to collect as my ideas on marriage progressed. So I asked my informants to try to remember what each resident's status with respect to all items had been in January 1974, when the initial census was taken. Imprecise and incomplete as these data may be, they were important for the kinds of associations I was interested in.

The census contained information on sex, age category (I used twelve categories by which the Kpelle classify people), town of residence, number of children, and economic enterprises. In addition, I collected data on house ownership, household composition, and features of the house (zinc or thatch roof, cement or mud coating, number and kind of auxiliary buildings known as "kitchens," and

5. I will adopt the convention of using double quotes to indicate Liberian English or idiomatic expressions. Single quotes around words or phrases indicate translations or translation glosses.

so on). For Haindii and Dobli Island I gathered information on the history of each house—who built it and how the present owner acquired it. Because my main interest was marriage, I carefully collected information on people's current marital status, number of spouses (for men), current spouses' residences, number of previous marriages, and whether previous marriages ended in death or divorce.

Though the statistics in Chapter 5 help to substantiate the arguments advanced, the case studies, especially those in Chapter 5, convey more vividly my point that conjugal relationships and social identities (cf. Goffman 1959 and Goodenough 1966) are much more fluid than Westerners suspect. We assume that kin and marital categories are clear-cut and unambiguous: for example, a woman is either married or not married. Kpelle marital status, however, is more accurately seen as a process that gradually transfers a woman from her kin to a man and his kin. Thus marital status is not ascertainable from appearance or clothing, as it is in many societies. Nor are people always certain about their own marital status, as Comaroff and Roberts (1977) have shown for the Kgatla. Even the cognitive categories "married" and "unmarried" are not clear-cut. For example, the word for 'woman,' *neni*, is also the word for 'wife,' and the word for 'man,' *surōŋ*, is also the word for 'husband.' (See Comaroff & Roberts 1977: 113.) Chapter 4 explains how I tried to impose order on Kpelle conjugal categories for purposes of comparing the modern and traditional villages.

Not only is marital status often unclear, but people can play upon gradations in status to achieve certain ends. It is common knowledge that genealogies may be fudged in any society—invented or denied as the occasion warrants. But I was unprepared for the kinds of marital manipulation I witnessed among the Kpelle, particularly in Haindii and Dobli Island. Men, for example, usually insist that women with whom they are living have been "turned over" to them, but they may swear that troublesome wives are only girlfriends whom they can discard with no legal penalties. Married women, on the other hand, may try to prove they were not "turned over" to poor men or men they have come to dislike, but may try to hold on to wealthy men even though they are not yet "turned over" to them. Similarly,

mothers may manipulate the social identity of their children's fathers in order to leave men they do not like or to get support from wealthy men. Women may also manipulate their own social identity to keep possibilities open for support from lovers. Married women, for example, may present themselves as single to acquire extra support, or to help their husbands gain wealth by suing their lovers for adultery. Single women may present themselves as married to keep different lovers from getting jealous of each other. Single women may also use different names with each of their lovers, to keep them ignorant of each other.

When brought to court, cases involving disputes over marital status invariably end in a tangle of contradictory testimonies from numerous witnesses. Whether attempts to restructure social reality are successful depends, of course, on the personal influence of particular actors, as well as on social and economic support for their efforts. Given the sometimes hopelessly ensnarled disposition of legal rights in women, as well as the changing definitions that actors try to impose in different situations, I hope the reader will understand why taking a census and recording marital statuses, biological fathers, and even names was such a long and painful, though fascinating, process. Despite seeming confusions, actors' attempts to formalize or change marital reality are consistent with the generalization that Kpelle people try to escape obligations to superiors who want to control them, but try to keep docile subordinates bound to them. (Comaroff & Roberts 1977 provide a helpful discussion of the logic behind the apparent manipulation chaos.)

Manipulation of marital status is, of course, not confined to modern areas such as Haindii and Doblí Island. People in traditional areas also misrepresent their marital status, and they do it for the same reasons: to gain wealth or political power. But this manipulation becomes intensified in changing areas such as Haindii and Doblí Island simply because new options, particularly for women, are developing so rapidly. So although such manipulations are common in all Kpelle areas, their prevalence in the modern area signifies that people there are taking advantage of new economic opportunities to restructure limiting relationships.

During the last two months of my stay I administered a domestic