J. Nash, *Matriliny and Modernization: The Nagovisi of South Bougainville*

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Document généré le 29/03/2016
tell us about the meaningful intercourse among kin and affines as changes occur in the
media of exchange, and as some wealth becomes “decontextualised”. We are given
hints at the Mandak attempt to keep symbolic meanings attached to new wealth, for
instance, by defining shillings as “food received”, but there is no discussion of what
one suspects must be a move in the other direction, given the changes noted above.

The limitations of the study emerge again in Chapter 7, where Clay compares Mandak
symbolic inversions with what she perceives to be similar transformations of symbolic
elements in several other societies. The mode of analysis is one which proposes simple
ideas in a cloud of verbal congestion. Thus, we hear that “ritual speeches by women
serve as transformational contexts for the female metaphorization of male cross-unit
exchanging” (p. 139). Moreover, the containment of the analysis to a symbolic dimen-
sion obscures the power aspects of social interactions. In myth and ritual, we are told,
one sex takes on the cultural roles of the other. In Arapesh male initiation, for instance,
Clay quotes data showing male actors in female guise “giving birth” to the initiatives,
an act of cultural procreation which advances the youths to membership in a privileged
social group, a political consequence Clay’s analysis does not pursue. Symbolic inver-
sion does more than merely express both sides of a symbolic dialogue. In addition,
the restricted focus of the social world of nurture does not prepare us for the information
in the concluding pages that Mandak point to the current prevalence of sorcerers in
their society. I would agree with Clay’s final assessment that the value of a symbolic
focus in cultural analysis lies in its emphasis on some crucial, and often ignored, features
of cultural meaning. I would add, however, that the dynamics of social life from which
the symbols emerge, may also be overlooked.

Shirley Lindenbaum

Jill Nash, Matriliny and Modernisation: The Nagovisi of South Bougainville. Port
Moresby and Canberra, New Guinea Research Unit, Australian National University
Press, 1974, vii + 147 p., append., bibl., index, tabl., cartes (New Guinea Research
Bulletin, 55).

The “New Guinea Research Bulletins”, which ceased publication when the Unit’s
contribution to Papua New Guinea Studies was succeeded by the country’s own Institute
of Applied Social and Economic Research, were designed to make readily and quickly
available the results of investigations within a range of disciplines. Here we have an
anthropologist whose skills not only further an academic debate of some importance,
but are directed towards planners and policy makers involved in “development”.

The Nagovisi of Bougainville, like other Melanesians observing matrilineal descent,
are popularly thought to have special problems in adjusting to modernisation. The
introduction of cash cropping to such societies is held to raise the level of land dispute
and create intolerable strains between the father-son dyad and the institution of matril-
iny. Nash quotes from the Government’s Annual Reports which repeatedly assert
that “in communities in which inheritance is based on matrilineal descent, an increasing
number of men are coming to want their own children to succeed to their land rights.
Again, it is natural for progressive individuals who have planted perennial crops or
made other improvements to their land to hope to pass rights to their own children as
individuals...” (p. 3). Nagovisi have not only taken up the planting of cocoa with some
enthusiasm: they have done so with their matrilineal institutions intact. Fathers are
not desperate to endow their sons, and affines are not in constant strife over land and
the new property. To understand why the Nagovisi accommodation has apparently
been so smooth we have to treat relations between men and women as a contributory,
and not merely contingent, factor.

Not that modernisation in Nagovisi has been entirely trouble-free. In a concluding
look to the future, Nash points to issues on the horizon, above all the fact that land
is rapidly becoming scarce. This is a theme her husband takes up in one of the first
of the new IASE monographs (Mitchell 1976). His account of the concomitants of
cash cropping, with an unequally distributed and fluctuating income, the conversion
of land from subsistence to commodity production and the consumption of western
goods, makes it quite clear that the problems which are going to face the Nagovisi
derive not from an intractable mode of kin reckoning but from processes set up by
"development" itself. In changing situations, is matriliny doomed? asked Mary
Douglas (1969). Only if scarce resources devalue labour, she suggests, — a conclusion
illuminating in the context of Nagovisi attitudes to labour described below. As Mitchell
sturdily asserts (1976: 148): "The culture is not at fault."

There is more here, however, than a cautionary tale for planners. The Nagovisi
evidence suggests that in the tensions and conflicts generated by the social arrangements
of other peoples with matrilineal institutions it is not necessarily matriliney as such which
is at fault. The strength of Nagovisi institutions lies in the way in which men's and
women's contributions to the household and the lineage are structured. Notions of
nurture and labour are significant.

The troubles of the matrilineal Tolai (New Britain) in the face of economic change
have been well documented. Nash sets out a series of contrasts between Tolai and
Nagovisi. Most important is that where as Tolai combine matrilineal inheritance with
patri-virilocal residence, Nagovisi reside uxorilocally. A couple makes its living from
the wife's property, where cash as well as subsistence crops are grown. Married men
do not undertake economic activities with their own kin, and sister's sons do not inherit.
Now in Audrey Richard's famous typology (1950), of all residential arrangements that
of uxorilocal marriage among the Central Bantu produces the "most extreme" conflict
of interests. "All the men of a community", she writes (1950: 247), "cannot at the same
time act as mother's brothers with authority over their own local descent group and
also as husbands living in their own wives' villages." The Nagovisi seemed untouched
by such a conflict. On the contrary, as the comparison with Tolai shows, it is their
uxorilocal arrangements which make for stability. Indeed, under the development
of cash cropping, uxorilocality has increased in statistical incidence.

Residence itself is an index of beliefs about nurture. This is Nash's summary of
the Tolai system (pp. 126-127): Tolai "residence patterns are made workable by the
belief that children have the right to receive sustenance from the father's clan, i.e., the
land of the father's matrilineage may be used for the support of his children [...] Father
and son work together on cash crops, inseparable from the ground, on the father's
matrilineage ground. At the death of the father, the son must [...] relinquish these
plots [...] The Tolai have taken a rule which worked for food gardens [...] and tried
to apply it to permanent crops, with resulting great conflict". Nagovisi fathers and
sons also work together, but on the mother's matrilineage land. The products of a
husband's labour benefit his wife and children. But it is his labour which is owed them,
and not his matrilineage property. Valuables, use-rights to land, trees, are all transferred
between the women of the lineage. "The great dichotomy of rights and obligations
is between the males and females of a descent group. Both are said by the Nagovisi
to 'own' the property of the descent group, but after a man marries out of his descent group, he neither contributes to nor may profit from the assets [...] In practice, the use of these assets is exclusively for the women of the clan” (p. 38). Towards members of their own descent group men act as advisors and guardians of morality.

Nagovisi women are full jural persons, with title to property, able to take decisions on behalf of others, and to summon the backing of their descent group if need be. Women fill the office of lineage head, though either men or women may also become prominent as “big men”, “big women”. Nash remarks: “In matrilineal societies where women do not have significant rights and duties regarding the descent group [...] conflict is inevitable, simply because all of society’s rights and duties will then devolve upon men [...] If as among the Nagovisi, women can be responsible for duties and exercise rights, men can be structurally freed of some of them” (p. 118). Such obligations that a man has towards his own matrilineage and that of his wife are mutually exclusive. Especially important in the context of cash crops is the fact that there is no conflict of interest in respect of property.

Nagovisi notions of labour thus mean that the husband is regarded as working for his wife and children. His daughters are heirs to both ground and trees. Other men of the wife’s lineage have no direct interest in them; proceeds from the sale of cash crops remain within the household. This “solution” rests not only on rules of inheritance which keep property in a female line and on the acknowledgement of women as full jural persons (Richard’s “matriarchal” solution) but in the management of relations between men and women. Men dominate their wives in the domestic context. They do not, however, contribute materially to their own descent group, and do not seem to exercise much control over the everyday affairs of their sisters. On the contrary, a husband is identified, conceptually and pragmatically, with the economic affairs of his wife’s lineage, profiting from its assets. Furthermore, it is through their productivity that men achieve eminence. They become “big men” from the feasts they prepare with their wives for the women’s matrilineage events. They not only owe labour to their wives and children; it is by such exertions that they acquire individual renown. (Management rights in their wife’s property in no way entail their own descent group mates.) Husbands married into a group are moiety “brothers” to one another; the individuation of men’s interests nevertheless also leads to leadership roles among men being down played, and novel communal projects involving the combined labour of these men are sometimes hard to sustain.

I have reproduced Nash’s argument rather than attempt a critique both because of its intrinsic interest and because it appeared in a special purpose publication which was not the place for a more extended analysis. Had this been possible, one might have looked for an interpretation which took into account recent Melanesian work on men’s and women’s roles in exchange and the definition of nurture. Comparisons with the Hopi, for example, or with Polly Hill’s cocoa farmers of Ghana also suggest themselves. But as it stands, this is an excellent account. What comes over as distinctively Nagovisi in these people’s response to modernisation is a particular ideological assessment of the place which labour and production have in the affairs of the conjugal household and the matrilineage.

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