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The Historical Course of True Love in the Sepik

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In 1987, while living among Chambri migrants settled on the outskirts of Wewak, the capital of East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea, we were shown a letter Emma Kambu had written and was about to send to her Chambri boyfriend. Emma was a fourteen-year-old Chambri girl; in her words, one who "loved to wear smart clothes and go around the town," as did many other girls of her generation. She admitted to us with some giggling that she wanted to marry the young man to whom she had addressed the letter. The letter had been written with care, in English, on a piece of notebook paper. To it was glued a picture cut from a Japanese calendar purchased by Emma for just this purpose at Wewak's Christian book shop. The picture was of a crane standing on one leg under a tree. Below the picture was the caption, "Follow the way of love," attributed to First Corinthians, verse 14. Emma's letter continued with this theme of love:

Dearest bro,

Hey, we are in trabel now. Please I want to see you at Kreer market at 12 noon. Just today. Bro don't refuse my note. Please come and I will tell you what they were talking about us.

Please my one you must come and face me.

Thanks.

Love,

Emma Kambu

In 1933, while Margaret Mead was living in one of the three Chambri villages on Chambri Island, in the Chambri Lake region of the Sepik, she saw Yebiwali, a young widow, make an overture to the young man she wished to marry. Specifically, Yebiwali sent Tchuikumban the head of a fish. This action, like that of Emma, also precipitated some "trabel," which Mead describes at length.

As we shall see, the difference between calendar illustrations and fish heads indicates more than just an adjustment in the conventions of courtship during the fifty years that separates these events. The concern of this chapter is to determine the changes—as well as the continuities—in the lives of Chambri women from the time of Yebiwali's overture, shortly after "first contact," to that of Emma's, in the present. The lives of these two young women, viewed in their respective settings, can provide both illustration and evidence of the course of gender relations during a most important period of Chambri history. In our effort to compare the lives of these women and to understand the character of the gender relationships each participated in, special attention is given to the issue of domination. Although a concern with domination would be appropriate in almost any representation of gender relations, it is virtually essential in discussing gender relations among the Chambri. The Chambri, after all, were described by Mead as a society in which *women dominated over men.*

In order to examine Chambri gender relationships over time, one needs to recognize that domination must be understood with respect to specific—and changing—cultural circumstances. An essential component of domination is that persons actually *experience* control by others that they regard as unwarranted. To understand what might be experienced as unwarranted control, one must take into account the objectives and interests of actors in particular cultural instances. One must consider what men and women might actually seek to be doing, benefit from doing and, correspondingly, perhaps prevent others from doing. One also needs to consider cultural definitions (which may themselves be subjects of contention) of what is unwarranted—as opposed to appropriate or reasonable—control.[1] Given these concerns, the following is proposed as our working definition of domination for the Chambri: that which *they would regard as unjustifiable deprivation of the capacity to make reasonable decisions.*

In order to understand Chambri gender relations, we will explore in some detail the (culturally defined) objectives and interests of both men and women as well as the extent to which they are, respectively, able to pursue these without significant interference. In this latter regard, a focus on Chambri marriage arrangements, a major area in which the objectives and interests of men and women are distinct yet intersect and the context in which we meet Emma and Yebiwali, is especially appropriate for consideration of the possibilities of gender domination.

In the discussion of Yebiwali's case we examine not simply what Mead reported as happening, but the perspective Mead brought to her description of the events. Although partially correct about the character of Chambri gender relations—Chambri women did evidently have substantial control over their lives—Mead's account of Yebiwali's situation reflects an instructively significant misreading of the objectives Yebiwali was, as a Chambri woman, likely to have had. Thus, Mead's perspective is discussed with some care for two reasons: to show the necessity of understanding gender relations—including those of domination—in terms that do correspond to culturally defined and experienced objectives of men and women, and to construct a more accurate rendering of those events.

Finally and most generally, we argue that calendar pictures replacing fish heads signaled an important transformation in socioeconomic circumstances which, in turn, modified the objectives of, and relationships between, Chambri men and women. Specifically, *domination* (as defined in this chapter) has come to have a new meaning: over the years there has been a shift for Chambri with respect to their cultural standards concerning what would be an unjustifiable deprivation of the capacity to make reasonable decisions. That Yebiwali was not (as it turned out) able to fulfill her desire to marry Tchuikumban had, we think, a different import to her than would be the case for Emma if she were unable to marry the man of her choice. Simply put, Yebiwali was a different sort of Chambri than was Emma; that comprising domination for her would not be the same as for Emma.

YEBIWALI: HER LIFE AND TIMES

Yebiwali's case had interested Mead primarily because it seemed anomalous. Mead contended that Chambri women dominated Chambri men because individual Chambri women had economic autonomy: they were in charge of the underlying economics of life. They controlled subsistence fishing and, of even more significance, they wove the mosquito bags that were an important item of trade throughout the Sepik region of lowland swamps. In addition, Mead claimed, women controlled the shell valuables derived from the sale of these mosquito bags (Mead 1935:254).

Mead's interpretation of Chambri gender relationships, and thus of Yebiwali's circumstances, rested on certain Western—rather than Chambri—ideas of the importance of economic autonomy. She argued that because Chambri women controlled major economic resources, Chambri men lacked the economic individualism that would enable them to be themselves. Instead, they were forced to act against their own inclinations which, in turn, produced a crisis in their subjective experience of themselves—a psychosexual conflict which, in some cases, became a neurosis. Mead wrote:

> Here is a conflict at the very root of [a Chambri male's] psycho-sexual adjustment; his society tells him that he rules women, his experience shows him at every turn that women expect to rule him.... But the actual dominance of women is far more real than the structural position of the men, and the majority of Tchambuli [Chambri] young men adjust themselves to it, become accustomed to wait upon the words and desires of women. (1935:271)

However, Yebiwali, in Mead's view, lacked the basis of autonomy because she had never acquired the skill of weaving mosquito bags. Consequently, *unlike other Chambri women*, Yebiwali could not marry the man of her choice, Tchuikumban, to whom she had given the head of a fish. Thus, as part of her argument that it was their economic autonomy that enabled Chambri women in general to dominate over Chambri men, Mead claimed that, in this particular case, Yebiwali was dominated because she lacked vital economic skills (Mead 1935:261–262).

Although there appears to be no evidence to support Mead's claim that Chambri women dominated over Chambri men, our data do suggest that Chambri women were not dominated by Chambri men. They suggest as well that Mead was quite correct in linking

Chambri gender relations to their socioeconomic circumstances. Yet the position we take on the implications of those circumstances differs from hers in major respects. To begin with, we attribute far more importance than did she to the influence of regional and systemic factors on gender relationships.

The Chambri were known throughout the area as producers and purveyors of essential commodities. Not only did Chambri women weave mosquito bags, but men fashioned stone tools from quarries on Chambri Island. These they traded to their Sepik neighbors, especially to the Iatmul for the shell valuables central to their ceremonial exchanges. Because their trade items were so important, the Chambri were relatively protected from attack by their powerful Iatmul neighbors and, therefore, never developed a male-oriented military organization comparable to that of the Iatmul. Relations between Chambri men and women were, for this reason alone, much more egalitarian than between Iatmul men and women (see Bateson 1958; Hauser-Schaublin 1977). Moreover, Chambri relations of trade mitigated against the development of male dominance in yet another way. Specifically, because the access of Chambri men to shell valuables was substantially dependent on the availability of these to their trading partners among the Iatmul, Chambri men could not appreciably increase the flow of shells to themselves by increasing their production of trade items. Thus, the control of women and their products—mosquito bags in particular—was irrelevant to either the military or political viability of Chambri men (see Feil 1984; Josephides 1985; Lederman 1986).

Not only is there more significance in such regional and systemic factors in determining gender relationships than Mead allowed, there is another aspect of her analysis that we believe to be erroneous; she interpreted economic relationships as they affected relationships of dominance according to cultural assumptions that make much better sense to us than to the Chambri. As one can see in her discussion of male psychosexual neuroses, she viewed dominance as the extent to which Chambri were unable to act as subjective individuals—that is, were unable to achieve self-expression because they lacked an economically derived individualism (see Gewertz 1984; Errington and Gewertz 1987a). But Chambri women and men sought neither such a Western form of self-expression nor such a Western form of relationship. Mead, thus, was imposing on the Chambri—and, in this case, on Yebiwali in particular—her own cultural understanding of persons and objectives and, based on this understanding, her own cultural interpretation of what constituted dominance in gender relationships (see also Strathern 1988).

Let us, then, briefly reconsider the case of the remarriage of Yebiwali to see whether *in terms of Chambri assumptions* about the nature of persons and their objectives she was dominated. Was she, indeed, unjustifiably deprived by Chambri men of the capacity to make and enact what by Chambri standards were reasonable decisions? Was she, in other words, deprived of the capacity to pursue those strategies that were in fact important to her: those strategies that would enable her to become, what could be termed, a Chambri woman of worth?

During a debate in the men's house, Chambri men argued at length about whom Yebiwali should marry (Errington and Gewertz 1987b). According to our own Western cultural expectations about what constitutes dominance in gender relationships, certain data concerning this debate might indeed suggest that she was dominated by these men. After all: (1) Yebiwali was not allowed to be present—much less express her prefer-

ences—during the discussion. (2) Nor did these male debaters even address the possibility that she be allowed to marry Tchuikumban, the man to whom she had shown interest. (3) Instead, the discussion focused on the claims of two political factions, each asserting control of superior cosmological power. (4) Eventually, the wishes of her former father-in-law prevailed that she should marry his preference, a political ally named Akerman. Thus, Mead concluded that Yebiwali, lacking the economic power based on proceeds of mosquito bag sales, was dominated because she was forced, through the activities of these Chambri men, to marry a man not of her own choosing.

But what, from the point of view of *Chambri men and women*, would actually have been of concern in this case? Were they, as Mead suggests, concerned with subjective self-expression that could only come from an individualistic economic autonomy? In contrast to what one would expect from Mead's interpretation, those Chambri men and women we knew not only defined themselves by, but were thoroughly enmeshed in, social and economic networks. Indeed, for a Chambri, the importance of immersion in such networks virtually went without saying.

That they were the very stuff of life would have been apparent to any Chambri in a thoroughly redundant way from earliest experience. For example, the houses into which children were born were themselves embodiments and illustrations of patrilineal connection, solidarity, and affinal interdependence. Each house not only carried the name of the apical ancestor of the house-owning patriclan, but had its central post carved with clan emblems and draped with clan ceremonial gear. On either side of this central post, and supporting the thatched roof, were some five or six additional carved posts, each called by an ancestral name of the agnate whose domestic area surrounded the post. Each of a man's wives, in turn, placed her cooking hearth in his area of the house and fastened there the ancestral hook she was given by her own agnates on which to hang the basket containing her patrimony of shell valuables. Such a house, the very physical context of much of daily life, was hence a reiteration of the social relationships of the clan.

Moreover, in significant measure, Chambri were the incarnation of their patrilineal and matrilateral relationships. Chambri were given names by their patrilineal and matrilateral relatives that both reflected and affected their fundamental social relationships and identity. These names, which were public knowledge and used as terms of address, served in much the same way as did the clan house itself to define Chambri through reference to their social networks. In addition to these publicly known names, there were secret names used to evoke powerful ancestors and other totemic spirits. The most efficacious of these secret names were the carefully guarded possessions of particular men. They provided the basis of what might be regarded as a man's spiritual reputation—his reputation for having cosmological and other power. The specific names a man knew, when used correctly, enabled him to become his ancestors and thus to incorporate their efficacy.

Thus, rather than regarding themselves as unique subjectivities—as unique clusters of dispositions, capacities, and perspectives—Chambri considered themselves to be essentially the embodiment of their social networks, the embodiment of their relationships with both living and dead. These relationships were the basis not only of identity, but of long-term obligation. Both men and women were unequal to those who had provided them

with their lives—their mothers and those, the wife-givers, who had provided their mothers—because they owed them a profound debt for life itself. However, women were able to pursue a much different strategy than men for achieving the relative equality and thus the relative worth which came through redemption from this ontological debt.

Women were able eventually to achieve equality with their mothers and those wife-givers who provided them by reproducing social persons. In this highly endogamous society (with over 30 percent of marriages with a matrilateral cross-cousin) after several generations, a woman's descendants became members of the same patriclan as those who had given her life. Moreover, given the Chambri assumption that identity was largely constituted by social position, these descendants were, in a fundamental way, those ascendants whose positions they had come to hold. Hence, a woman, because she could produce life, was able to pay her ontological debt and achieve equality through a kind of reproductive closure: through replacing—reproducing—those who gave her life, she would have caused her own existence (see Weiner 1976, for somewhat comparable circumstances).

Like other Chambri women, Yebiwali in all likelihood sought to achieve worth primarily through reproductive closure. Although, as other Chambri women, Yebiwali might prefer to marry in such a way that her daughter's daughter would eventually assume the social position of her mother, any children she might bear, *regardless of how she was married*, would be viewed as adequate self-reproduction.

In contrast to women, who could with time pay their ontological debts in full, Chambri men could never completely compensate their wife-givers for having provided the women who had given them life. That men could never entirely free themselves of ontological debt generated a complex politics in which they pursued strategies for dealing with unfulfilled (and unfulfillable) affinal obligations. Senior men, primarily, were engaged in continuing struggles to achieve relative worth by showing that they were at least equal, if not superior, to all other men in their capacity to deal with their debts by compensating wife-givers. The outcome of these struggles, as with the outcome of events most generally, was seen as determined by the relative power men held through their knowledge of secret and efficacious names. Because men were, in fundamental respects, their capacity to incarnate ancestral power, the course politics took provided an essential measure of worth and being.

Marriage decisions were thus political moves that required careful calculation by clansmen, especially clan leaders, of existing clan resources and obligations. Periodically, as with the case of Yebiwali, a decision might have to be made about the future marriage of a young widow. Those of her dead husband's clan could choose to perpetuate an existing affinal obligation by marrying her to one of her dead husband's agnates. Or, if overwhelmed by their current obligations, rather than face the humiliation of possible default or meager payment, they might decide to sacrifice a measure of prestige by letting the relationship lapse. Yet, even under these latter circumstances, they would still seek to play a political role. Because they had paid at least some bride price for her, they would attempt to influence her remarriage so as to derive some strategic benefit.

And so it went in this ceaseless competition between men to show themselves as persons of power and worth. In this Chambri context, the choices men made of marriage partners were not expressions of personal—subjective—attraction. Marriage choices were the playing out of their political strategies in a context of perpetual indebtedness.

Thus, in Chambri society, the objectives, strategies, and spheres of activity of men and women were essentially distinct and ordinarily did not conflict. Nor, it should be noted, were Chambri women considered of less cultural value than were Chambri men. Therefore, the fact that only men spoke in the debate concerning Yebiwali's remarriage and that the only concerns voiced were male political concerns did not engage or much affect Yebiwali, nor mark her as inferior. Because Yebiwali found the decision of the men acceptable—although for reasons other than theirs—she did not have to be coerced to marry her father-in-law's preference, Akerman, rather than Tchuikumban. Moreover, it must be stressed that *even a powerful man would not wish to marry a woman against her will* for she might disclose to his enemies names and other ritual secrets he had inadvertently revealed, perhaps while sleeping, and so entirely undermine his future efficacy and worth.

Hence, even in this singular case—the only one Mead encountered of a woman who appeared to be under male domination—Yebiwali was not dominated since marriage either to Tchuikumban or to Akerman would have satisfied her interests as a Chambri woman. Regardless of whom she married, she knew that her marriage was appropriately a matter for consideration by her agnates, affines, and others composing her social network and self. It would be they, after all, who would transact in the shell valuables, the symbolic wombs, that would convey her from one extended household to another. (Indeed, her present of the head of a fish to Tchuikumban anticipated her role as fish-provider in such a domestic context.)

Significantly, in 1984, when we met Yebiwali as a very old lady, some fifty years after Mead had first described her case, she insisted that she be addressed as "wife of Akerman" and, in addition, emphasized in several different ways her success in having reproductively replicated herself.

TRANSFORMATIONS

By the time that Papua New Guinea had achieved independence in 1975, most Chambri children were attending grades one through six in the local Catholic school. Money had completely replaced shell valuables in affinal exchanges, and a clan's viability in ceremonial matters had become less dependent upon the number and solidarity of its members than on the remittances of its wage-earners. Yet these remittances were used in affinal exchanges, as shell valuables had been, to construct the effigies that were symbolic women. These effigies were presented by wife-takers to wife-givers, as one presentation in a lifelong series, in return for the actual women received.

When women had been given as wives in exchange for shell valuables, they had not been regarded as purchased objects worth a certain number of shells, but rather as embodiments of affinal relationships of enduring inequality. The same had remained true when presentations were made in money. In the context of affinal exchange, money was used largely as the functional equivalent of symbolic wombs—it was part of a gift economy; however, in the context of most other transactions—as, for instance, at a trade store—it was a generalized medium of exchange—it was part of a commodity economy. It could be used to buy almost anything—radios, tape recorders, outboard motors—and did not necessarily generate further relationships.

The Chambri, then, had come to operate within both a gift and commodity economy (Gregory 1982). It was, however, unclear, at least in the Chambri instance, whether this separation of context and meaning would persist. Certainly there were some indications that the meaning money had in the commodity economy might displace the meaning it had in the gift economy so that, for example, the presentation of bride price might come to be regarded as the purchase of a woman rather than as a part of an affinal exchange. Now that the women were acquired with the same medium of exchange as were a vast array of commodities which could be owned and controlled outright, two related possibilities were likely to arise: one, affinal relations might become largely commercial; and two, gender relations might shift—women might acquire some of the attributes of commodities.

Indeed, during field work in 1983 we encountered several instances in which wife-takers speculated as to whether exceptionally high bride prices might be sufficient to retire the affinal debt. To the extent that social relations became substantially monetized in these ways, the concept and experience of ontological debt and, consequently, the way in which personal worth was defined and established, appeared likely to undergo substantial change. Wife-takers' contribution of money could be regarded as any commercial transaction might be regarded, subject to the same appraisals. Moreover, if affinal exchanges became comparable to other commercial transactions, there would be the possibility that payment of cash might confer disposal rights. Thus, if the acquisition of a bride came to be generally viewed primarily as a monetary transaction, not only might affinal relationships be terminated on the conclusion of the business deal, with no social relationship necessarily established between wife-givers and wife-takers, but also women might be dominated while pursuing their own interests.

Upon return to the Chambri some four years later, we expected to find that social relationships would have become increasingly monetized in just these ways, and that monetization had progressed furthest in the towns, where Chambri found themselves dependent on cash for even their subsistence. It was in one such town—Wewak—that Emma Kambu and the boyfriend to whom she planned to send her love letter lived.

EMMA: HER LIFE AND TIMES

By the early 1970s, Chambri came to Wewak in ever-increasing numbers, staying with those kin or co-villagers already living in the area known as Chambri Camp. They came primarily to earn money to take or send home. But they also came to see what town life was like. Women who came to sell fish might stay several months before returning to Chambri; the men who accompanied them or those who came alone might look for jobs and stay longer. They built houses or additions to existing structures for themselves from whatever was available—bush materials, scavenged pieces of sheet metal, and even cardboard—and squeezed these in as they could. The 117 adults living in the Camp came to describe it as the fourth Chambri village. Indeed, as many lived there as in any one of the three home villages.[2] And furthermore, many of those living in the Camp eventually considered it their home and did not plan to return to Chambri at all, except perhaps for brief visits. Virtually all, however, still considered themselves to be thoroughly Chambri, bound to other Chambri for their very identity as persons by ties of relationship and by complex and continuing histories of interaction.

(Dawn Ryan, in Chapter 14 of this volume, reports similarly that Uritai living in town rarely visit their village but still regard themselves as Uritai.)

For young people, in particular, life in town was preferable to that at Chambri because it provided them with experiences and opportunities that simply did not exist at Chambri. Moreover, it provided them with relative freedom from traditional forms of authority.

Young Chambri men and women found wandering around Wewak with their Chambri friends exciting, especially when they could present themselves in stylish clothes. They would spend hours in the trade stores looking at portable radio–tape recorders and at clothing, and at other products that would further embellish their appearances. And, as they circulated in little groups looking at the sights of Wewak, Chambri youth were also looking at other Papua New Guineans—a few from the Highlands or perhaps from Rabaul, but most from the various villages of the Sepik. Although there was ordinarily only minimal interaction between these Papua New Guineans, such as an occasional greeting in Pidgin English, most knew each other, often by name, and certainly by village or region of origin and by area of residence in one of the twenty-nine equivalents to Chambri Camp scattered throughout Wewak.

Encounters among these youths who were socially peripheral but not socially irrelevant to each other were charged with excitement stemming from a sense of freedom, potentiality, and danger. Such a sense was most palpable at night, when young men, and increasingly young women, wearing their most sophisticated outfits, congregated to drink and dance at the Sepik Club or another bar, or at some temporary dance ground. Although liaisons occasionally occurred, more typically the efforts by a young man to impress a young woman from another group provoked a fight between the young men of both groups. (In an instance that most Chambri found amusing, a young Chambri man asked a woman from another village to dance, and when she refused, he kicked her in the rear. His performance as seducer and fighter was regarded by even his friends as seriously flawed.)

Although everyday life in town was often exciting, it was also frequently hard, as well as dangerous. Only 17 percent of those adults living in the Chambri Camp had regular salaries. Most of the other men and women in the Camp were artisans—carvers or basket weavers—and relied for their survival on income earned from intermittant sales. The average yearly income of these artisans, we estimate, was only (U.S.) $230. They eked out a living somehow, depending for food at least partly on smoked fish occasionally sent from Chambri, green mangoes gathered from trees belonging to others, and small marsupials killed in the bush. Moreover, many had to rely on remittances from kin farther afield in Papua New Guinea.

There was also a widespread perception that crime, particularly in the towns, was rampant (see Morauta 1986; O'Collins 1986). During our research in 1987, three Chambri (in Wewak alone) were arrested for two separate thefts—robbery at knife point and burglary—and three Chambri suffered attack—one rape, one stabbing, and one death as a result of beating.

When those Chambri no longer new to the town and its excitements reflected on why they remained in Wewak, they recognized that if they were to return to Chambri Island they would have plenty to eat. Indeed, they talked nostalgically of low-water time when the lake literally overflowed with fish. They also recognized that one would be safer from criminal attack in the home villages than in Wewak.

Many migrants were nevertheless committed to town life because it enabled them to escape the constraints of the village. Young people, especially, sought the freedom from what they had, as moderns, come to regard as the coercion characteristic of traditional Chambri life. Rex Kamilus, a Chambri migrant, expressed these feelings, saying that in town, "you are free to walk about; you are the master of yourself." In contrast, he said that people at home practiced the "ancestral custom of killing people by poisoning [ensorcelling] them." When asked to elaborate, he said that if, for example, he tried to seduce a young woman at Chambri and her father found out about it, he would either ensorcell him or hire someone else to do so.

He continued by telling us that the "big men" at Chambri consistently prevented the younger men and women from holding all-night dance parties to modern music because they thought that such occasions encouraged young people to choose their own sexual and marriage partners. He stressed that big men liked to arrange marriages for everyone. (Indeed, as we have seen, the arrangement of affinal alliances was central to Chambri politics.) He described a recent debate that took place at Chambri concerning these parties. All of the older men sat on one side of the men's house, opposing the dances as new and pernicious, while all of the younger men sat on the other side, supporting them as new and desirable. The young men lost and the dances were discontinued.

A similar view, although reflecting a woman's perspective, was presented by Gabriella Apak, a woman of twenty-nine with two illegitimate children. She had been living in Wewak for seven years, supported largely by remittances from a brother working in the Bougainville copper mine. When we asked her why she did not return to Chambri, she at first said she was foolish for not doing so. Then, lowering her voice, she revealed that she and many other young women did not go home because they would be expected to marry old men whom they did not like and would be ensorcelled if they refused. If big men at Chambri were rejected, they would hire someone to place a bespelled object on a path frequented by the woman who had thwarted them. When she stepped over it, its magic power entered her body and she became sick and died.

Gabriella then told us of a recent dream that had warned her of this danger. She dreamt that a man she could not immediately identify had come to the house of one of her female friends at Chambri and said, "Here is some betel pepper for Gabriella. When Gabriella wants to chew betel nut, give her a little of this." She also described the man in her dream as holding the pepper, which was huge, at the level of his crotch. Gabriella knew that this had been a "real" dream—one which predicted forthcoming events—so she went to two other Chambri women living in the Camp to discuss it. They told her that she should avoid taking betel pepper from anyone. They also suggested the identity of the man wishing to ensorcell her. He had already poisoned another woman who had refused to marry him by providing her with poisoned betel pepper. As his intended victim bit into it, a bespelled leaf had emerged. Fortunately, she had the support of her father and brothers who had not wanted her to marry the sorcerer. They helped her to counteract the magic by gathering the youngest coconuts from the tallest trees, boiling the nuts and then washing her with the resulting liquid. This enabled her to be cleansed of the poison she had consumed, but it had been a narrow escape. Profiting from her dream and from the example of this young woman,

Gabriella did not intend to return to Chambri as long as this man desired her, lest she be doomed either to become his wife or to die.

It should be noted, however, that it was still the case that even a powerful man was not likely to wish to marry a woman against her will. Women back at Chambri said that the real reason Gabriella and other young women remained in Wewak was because they were too lazy to fish and gather firewood. One said resentfully: "They say we smell of fish; they like to walk around town smelling of perfume; they prefer to be supported by others rather than working hard themselves." Yet, regardless of whether Gabriella actually thought her only alternative to marriage was death if she returned to Chambri, she clearly did not want to be put under any pressure to marry someone not of her choice.

NICK AMBRI: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A CHAMBRI ROCK-AND-ROLL STAR

Rex, telling us earlier of the repressive actions of Chambri big men, had mentioned Nick. It was over performances of Nick's Yerameri Drifters Band that the big men had instituted a ban on all-night dances. Nick's songs blended traditional and modern elements: the lyrics consisted of a brief Chambri phrase repeated over and over, yet were concerned with themes of love and rebellion and were set to string-band music. The following eight songs (in translation) were the entire corpus of Nick's music:

1. Come here. (This was addressed to his girl friend.)
2. Father, mother, I don't belong here.
3. Mama said slow down. (But he did not listen.)
4. Mama said so. (But he did not listen.)
5. She follows me when I walk about. (This referred to the devotion of his girl friend.)
6. You're too loud. (This was what the big men said about his music.)
7. You don't want to wait for your boy friend. (He was trying to convince a woman to reject the man arranged for her as husband and to accept him.)
8. Bernadette. (This was the name of his girlfriend, later his wife.)

It was clear to us that the power for Chambri youth of these songs of love and rebellion came in significant part from the circumstances of Nick's own life. Whereas young men and women—like Gabriella and Rex—had fled Chambri rather than be subject to arranged marriages or other forms of coercion, Nick had, after attending vocational school in Madang for a year, chosen to remain at Chambri and challenge his elders. He had, we discovered, defied his father by marrying Bernadette, the woman of his own choice. His subsequent and lamentable—although, in the view of young Chambri men and women, entirely predictable—death epitomized for these youth the problems they faced living at home. At his funeral, a young band member eulogized him as "a man who fought for the rights of all young men and women."

A most vivid account of Nick and his circumstances, substantially abbreviated below, was provided at Chambri some six months after his death by Theo Pekur, a young man who described himself as Nick's best friend. In answer to the question: "What kind of man was Nick Ambri?" he had said:

> Nick was a good man.... He was not afraid to defy the big men when they told him whom he could or could not marry. He told the big men that we should be allowed to marry whom we choose because *we are young lives* [emphasis added]. His father was responsible for his death. His father didn't want him to marry Bernadette. One night when Nick's father and others were drinking, Nick's father promised that Nick would never marry Pombank's daughter [Bernadette]. But Nick insisted that he marry her because he already had made her pregnant. [Pombank, a church leader and catechist, insisted that the marriage take place.] Nick's father won't remain alive long now. Nick will fight back from the grave.

As has been stated, a senior man with any political aspirations would seek to gain renown for himself and the clan he led by displaying and augmenting his power through skillful manipulation of affinal relationships. To do this, he must ensure that his children—both sons and daughters—made strategic marriages. In his insistence that he determine who Nick married, Nick's father was, thus, acting as might any traditional senior Chambri male. (It must be added that, however reasonable his desire to designate Nick's wife might appear to other senior Chambri, no one would think that he should kill his own son over this or any other disagreement.)

Regardless of whether Nick thought his intransigence might end in his death, the extent of his opposition to his father was both impressive and instructive. It testified that representations of modern personhood were indeed attractive and persuasive to Chambri youth. These representations appeared in Western concepts of freedom of choice, in Catholic Church teachings about the freely entered "Christian marriage" and in popular literature, music, and advertising that extolled stylishness and the importance of fulfilling personal attraction, desire, and romance.

Indeed, many young Chambri men pinned sexy photographs—frequently bathing-suit advertisements—to the walls in their houses. Sometimes they added a text to these pictures, also clipped from magazines. For example, in one display of fifty or more photographs, a picture of several young Asian women in bikinis had affixed to it, by way of caption, a clipping with the words, "At what age did you first have sexual intercourse?" Another, of a woman sitting astraddle a man's lap, had scrawled on it, in Pidgin English: "Look at the two of them!"

Young women also clipped pictures from magazines, although they did not post them. One revealed an extensive collection, kept in an old school notebook. Her pictures were of white women, posed in romantic settings such as rose gardens, wearing formal, frilly dresses—frequently bridal gowns. She had underlined several of the captions, including: "With the rustle of silk and the hint of tulle, you will be the envy of all single girls. Make sure you choose the dress of your dreams on your wedding day."

THE COMMODITIZATION OF PERSONS

As mentioned, it seemed likely that Chambri social relationships would become increasingly commoditized as money continued to be used in ceremonial contexts. In other words, one might anticipate that the meaning of money in a gift economy would be displaced by its meaning in a commodity economy. In particular, one would expect that Chambri seniors might attempt to use money to break off certain of their entailments by retiring affinal

debts and thus terminating affinal obligations. Significantly, such an objective (if any, in fact, wished to pursue it) was in certain regards becoming less rather than more feasible.

This was so because, regardless of whether affinal politics would continue to be based on enduring obligations or on the termination of these obligations, it remained clearly essential to senior men that they still control the marriages of young men and women. Whatever Nick's father's ultimate strategy, he could implement it only in response to the entailments that defined his political position. And, the only way to respond effectively to those entailments—whether to perpetuate or terminate them or to inaugurate new ones—would be to ensure, as had senior Chambri before him, that his son married appropriately. However, the representations of modern personhood—those focusing on choice—that now prompted Chambri youth to defy their seniors were also a product of the intrusion of the commodity economy. Since money, after all, could be used to acquire all manner of things, "strictly commercial" transactions left the future open by precluding or terminating obligations. Thus, money had become the embodiment of choice. While money gave senior Chambri men the possibility—largely still unrealized—of transcending at least some of their affinal obligations, it was, at the same time, affecting young Chambri men and women in such a way as to make it increasingly difficult for senior men to pursue any of their traditional strategies, much less ones that called for the termination of affinal obligations.

Moreover, the possibility that the young women acquired through affinal transactions might come themselves to be regarded increasingly as commodities, subject to the control of others regardless of their own objectives, did not seem to have materialized. Given the increasing importance to Chambri youth of exercising choice, certainly young women were unlikely to accept any redefinition of marriage that would give more control to men than previously.

Nonetheless, it must also be stressed that *no* Chambri—even the most rebellious youth—wished to be adrift without ties to other Chambri. Rather, the question central to the dealings of senior men with junior men and women had become who would initiate and shape the ties that bound, who would make the choices that defined the pattern of obligation. Indeed, so important had choice become for Chambri youth that Nick's decision to risk alienation from his father by marrying the girl to whom he had himself been drawn, had become quite reasonable.

ON FISH HEADS AND LOVE LETTERS: THE MODERNIZATION OF PERSONS

Yebiwali, like other women in the 1930s, defined herself as a person in terms of her embeddedness within kin networks, and as a person of worth in terms of her capacity to repay her ontological debts, which meant bearing children. Undoubtedly attracted to Tchuikumban (enough so to send him the head of a fish), she might have been happier, in some sense, with Tchuikumban than she was, at first, with Akerman. Yet, she was not prevented from pursuing her strategy for becoming a person of worth when the men arranged her marriage with Akerman. She was, therefore, not dominated by the men. She was, in other words, neither in her own view nor in that of other Chambri (women and men), unjustifiably deprived of the capacity to make what were regarded as reasonable choices in pursuit of her own interests.

Like Yebiwali, Emma, a young woman of the 1980s, also defined herself in terms of kin networks. She was the repository of both patrilineal and matrilateral names and powers, she lived in a Chambri community, and she interacted almost exclusively with other Chambri. And, it may be recalled that the boyfriend to whom she intended to send (and eventually did send) the love letter was a Chambri. Indeed, Emma expected to remain embedded in a kin network, to have her kin receive at least some bride price for her, to have children, and to have her agnates and affines engage in affinal exchanges focusing on her and her children.

However, rather than have the selection of her husband follow from, and be determined by, the politics of senior men, she expected that those politics follow from *her choice* of husband. In contrast to the criteria of strategic choice they would follow, she would choose to marry someone who was sophisticated and could provide her with the clothes, perfume, earrings, and so on, through which she defined herself as stylish. Yet, if she were able to marry a man with sufficient earning capacity to satisfy her, her agnates were likely to be well satisfied too. After all, such a man could, as his initial affinal presentation, provide a very generous bride price. Thus, in Emma, we do not see the development of a new sort of person as much as the modernization of one. She had herself become the embodiment of what Gregory (1982) describes as the mixed gift-and-commodity economy of contemporary Papua New Guinea. Whereas Yebiwali sent Tchuikumban the head of a fish, Emma chose to spend perhaps $3.50 for her love token.

To judge by the examples of Rex, Gabriella, and Nick, the trouble Emma—and the other "young lives"—feared was a collision of generational differences. Who in particular they married meant something more to these young Chambri than it had meant to Yebiwali and to the young men and women of her generation. It meant that to marry someone not of their own choosing would be a serious diminution of self. There had, thus, been a partial shift in the definition of *person* and, hence, in what constituted dominance. There had, in other words, been a shift in the definition of objectives and, thus, in what would be considered a matter of reasonable choice.

Mead was wrong when she argued that Yebiwali was dominated because she was precluded from choosing her husband. Yet, Emma would be dominated if she were not allowed to choose hers. Although neither Yebiwali nor Emma sought self-expression through an economically derived individualism—immersion in social networks was essential for both—the Western representations that defined personhood in terms of the capacity to choose have become of central importance to—indeed, definitional of—young lives. Domination for Emma—as for Rex, Gabriella, and Nick—would be, at least partly, through the curtailment of choice. (It is not yet clear whether these young men would, in their turn, ever try to control the marriages of their juniors.)

CONCLUSION

Despite the shift in what would cause domination, there had not, in fact, been a significant change in gender relationships. It was unlikely that Emma would be forced into a marriage she did not want. In fact, few Chambri women either of Yebiwali's generation or of Emma's were dominated. This was so in part because, as mentioned, then as now, women

could cause too much trouble to their husbands by revealing, and thus undermining, the basis of their power. And it was also so in part because neither then, nor now, was it in male interests to control female production.

In this latter regard, the incorporation of their regional system into a world system had not had the same effect on gender relations for the Chambri as it often had elsewhere in Papua New Guinea and throughout the Third World. The economic factors affecting the lives of contemporary Chambri men and women, whether living at Wewak or at home, differed from those frequently reported where

> Western capitalistic systems...[impose] features such as the structure for general male dominance over females, based materially on preferential male access to strategic resources; private ownership of land and a money economy; overall inequality in the form of differential access to privileges and resources...; and an emphasis on the nuclear family, supported by a wage-earning male, as the ideal domestic unit. [Buenaventura-Posso and Brown 1980:124][3]

Just as the Chambri's protected position in their regional system as purveyors of specialized commodities had meant that the control of women and their products was irrelevant to either the military or political viability of Chambri men, so too was their position "out of the mainstream of [economic] development" (Philpott 1972:37), giving them a certain protection in the world system.

And, although Emma and other Chambri in Wewak existed on the edge of poverty (it was in fact unlikely that women like Emma would be married in dresses of "silk with a hint of tulle" to husbands with well-paying jobs), they could always return home. As long as Chambri Lake overflowed with fish, those in Wewak were not inevitably at the mercy of a cash economy in a Third World country. Emma, who pressed a "remembrance note" into our hands requesting that she be remembered with gifts of perfume and make-up from the United States, probably would not recognize how relatively lucky she was. After all, if calendar love notes and wedding dresses were to prove beyond her means and those of other Chambri, choice and consequent worth might still be expressed in other ways. Perhaps the head of a fish might again suffice.

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NOTES

1. We recognize that under some circumstances persons may not know what their (best) interests are—that is, what they should "reasonably" be allowed to do—and are, in consequence, "dominated" without their realization. In Errington and Gewertz 1987a and 1987b, we argue in detail that such a false consciousness is not characteristic of Chambri women.

2. In 1987, 43 percent of the adult Chambri population over the age of seventeen lived away from their island; 15 percent of those away lived in Chambri camp.
3. A handbook written by Papua New Guinean women suggests much the same thing:

> Modernization and the cash economy often make matters worse regarding the way we think about the work of men and women. The introduction of cash crops is usually called "development," yet it leads to lots of divisions in work which make men and women think differently about the usefulness of the different work they do (Mathie and Cox 1987:40).