

CHAPTER 5: MARRIAGE AND THE POLITICS OF YAMS

Social Organization

AUTHORITY AND THE EXERCISE OF POWER

- Every generation, one man who is the head of the matrilineage controls the land in which they live, until his death, as his younger brother takes his place, followed by his youngest sister's oldest son.
- The wife has the right to make certain decisions regarding marriage, if she wants to divorce her husband; she is allowed to do so.
- Chiefdom is important to the Trobrianders, and it is usually only the chiefs who practice polygyny, while other clan members practice monogamy
- A man can become politically significant in Trobriand society if he:
 - has support from wife's relatives; thus demonstrating the important role of the wife's family
 - has a large yam production

STATUS

- The largest yams were painted with white and black paint, reserved for the chief's wife
- Relationship of gardener and the owner's husband is evident through yam production, exchange and how the gardener is repaid
- Social status is dependant on the exchange of yams because the yam house is reflective of one's position in society

FORMAL AND INFORMAL POLITICAL SYSTEMS

What marks the beginning of a marriage?

- When the marriage between two individuals is announced, the wife's parents bring cooked yams, followed by a large presentation of raw yams delivered by the wife's father and mother's brother.

What happens in the "trial year" of a marriage?

- The trial year is the first year of the marriage when the couple stay with the husband's family
- The husband's mother cooks yams for the couple the entire year. Husband and wife eat yams together.

What happens after the trial year?

- Husband and wife cannot show their affection in public and do not eat together again

ADAPTATION AND ECONOMIC DISTRIBUTION

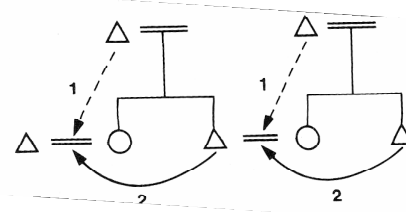
SYSTEMS OF PRODUCTION

- Yam gardens owned by women
- Use the slash and burn technique of cultivation
- Cultivated yams are not owned by the man who produces them

- Women grow sweet potatoes, greens, beans and fruit in small gardens

SYSTEMS OF EXCHANGE AND DISTRIBUTION

- Harvest yams to give away to others so that they can gain prestige and enhance their social status → reciprocity is depicted through wealth distribution of yams
- Husband of woman responsible for repaying the gardener → redistribution of wealth
- Conflict could arise because of an unequal distribution of yams
- Yams used by women to purchase goods, food and magic spells
- The first exchange is made after marriage and valuables also distributed among kin
- A woman's father makes her a yam garden every year until his son is ready to take on the responsibility of gardening for his sister
- Complex system in which, men produce for their sisters and daughters and receive yams from their wife's brother or father → exchange of yams indicative of the relationship between the man and his wife's family



KINSHIP AS AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE

ALLIANCE

- When a couple is married, there is an exchange between the wife and her kin with the husband and his kin. The yams in the garden reveal the affinal connection during each harvest.
- It can be said that these exchanges performed are what keep both lineages connected and bonded.
- If a woman rejects her husband or doesn't want to be with her husband, the husband's kin might try to persuade her to return by magic spells or offering the mother's brother another axe-blade.
- The valuables are kept by the wife's mother's brother and their alliances that were "...associated with marriage exchanges is broken" (87).

CONFLICT AND COHESION

- A poor harvest may cause conflict because it "...reflects the gardener's choice not to work so hard." (85). Although everyone looks festive and happy at the yam presentations, there could still be

Systems of Belief and Knowledge

BELIEF SYSTEMS AND PRACTICES

MAGIC

- Spells are chanted during each stage of yam cultivation to encourage a bountiful harvest
- Used to direct yam growth so that it is not impeded by stones, to encourage the growth of vines and to make it rain during a drought

RITUAL

- Gardener takes yams to the owner or the woman for whom they were grown
- Yams are placed in woven baskets and carried by young people to owner's hamlet
- Sing to announce the arrival of the yams → dancing and thrusting their hips in "a sexually provocative motion" (85)
- Ritual reflects the relation between yams and sexuality
- Rite of Passage: Marriage signifies the change from innocence of childhood to the responsibilities of adulthood → sexual change

MORAL SYSTEMS

TABOOS AND SHAME

- After the one year trial period in a marriage, it would be shameful for anyone to talk about their sexual life. The couples themselves would show no physical interactions in public such as holding hands.
- One of the most offensive verbal assaults to the Trobrianders would be to tell someone to "Fuck your wife (or husband)" (89) because it refers to their sexual life. Something like "Fuck your mother (or father)" (89) would be more much more acceptable.

COGNITIVE SYSTEMS

SYMBOLS

- Yams are symbolic of wealth and power, as Weiner compares it to a "bank account"
- Yams are a commodity, and a significant part of the Trobriand culture as yam gardens are politically important and magic spells are chanted during the cultivation of yams
- When the yams are on display in their lean-tos, gardeners "compare and appraise each other's productive efforts and everyone talks about which woman will get the most yams" (82).

"...the danger of unspoken discontent and antagonism" (85).

- The poor harvest could have been caused by the anger a gardener feel towards the woman's husband. Perhaps the pig that "...the husband killed the year before to repay him for his work in filling the yam house was too small." (86)
- Or, maybe his hard work in making a large yam garden before was ignored by the woman's husband and he was not given "...a stone axe-blade, as is the usual custom for exceptional harvests." (86)



MARRIAGE

- The cooked yam a couple receives prior to their marriage marks the beginning of their future marriage which will revolve around yam production. The wife's parents would present large amounts of raw yams following the cooked yams.
- Since the only time period when yam is most abundant is from May to September, most marriages take place during this time.
- These raw yams are usually brought by the wife's father and her mother's brother who also organize the distribution by presenting their own yams/
- It can be said that "...marriage is the foundation on which most of the yam displays and exchanges..." (86) take place.
- The groom's father and his mother's brother would collect valuables to repay the wife and her kin's presentation of yams.

INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

DOMESTIC AND PUBLIC

- During the first married year, couple shares yams prepared by the groom's mother
- During the second year, the responsibility of the household shifts to the woman and the couple does not share yams anymore
- After this time it is shameful to refer to the couple's sexual life and the couple does not ever touch in public
- Life is divided into public, where they work for themselves and their matrilineages and private, sexual life → enculturation allows this ideology to be passed along