A TRADITIONAL WEDDING DUA – "THE BRIDE"

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Introduction

A marriage ceremony, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, is a major event for both communities involved in the union. In an event-orientated society, it is an opportunity for celebration, display of wealth, social interaction, and an exciting change from the routine of everyday life.

Such was the case for the people of the Mid-Wahgi Valley, when Dua, of the Kulaka tribe, was married to John, of the Pagua tribe. Dua is the first-born daughter of Arim, the headman of Sigri village. Her mother had died some time earlier, but Dua has many mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters, who would play an important part in this special occasion. Dua is about 18 years old, and has received no formal schooling, but has been well trained in gardening and pig-raising, the necessary skills for any wife in Wahgi culture. John, the bridegroom, lives in the same vicinity, but belongs to a different tribe and language group, who came to settle in the valley, because of a land shortage in their own province. There are friendly relations between the two groups, with several other unions in marriage. Because of this, and the custom of sister-exchanges, it is not surprising that these two lines are, once again, cementing their ties

through marriage, for this new union will serve to maintain and strengthen relationships between the groups.

Gifts

Much activity has already preceded the day marked for the wedding ceremony. For several years, Dua and John, separately, have been involved in courting ceremonies (called *karim leg* and *tanim het*) with many of the opposite sex, and yet never with each other. When the time for marriage for John was considered right, his uncle began negotiating with Dua's line, regarding marriage. This included bargaining over an acceptable bride price, a payment collected by the groom from all his relatives, and given to the bride's line on the day of exchange. However, even before this day, gifts were given as a type of betrothal payment, securing Dua for John's line, while they raised the bride price. Dua's initial reaction to news of the intended marriage was to run away into the bush. However, after a long physical and verbal battle between her and her relatives, she submitted to their wishes. The money was raised, half of it being given by a rich uncle, living away in the city. The date for the exchange was marked, and preparations began. I was privileged to be invited to the exchange, and so, in this report, I will describe the events of this marriage ritual, starting at the night before the "big day", and going through the climax of the exchange.

Steam Bath

On the night before her wedding, the bride is subjected to a steam bath. The members of the two groups, highly decorated, gather in the house of a relative of Dua. A roaring fire is made. The two lines sit on opposite sides of the fire, while Dua herself sits beside the fire. Traditionally, the *Kunje Yi* (magic man) is present. He performs his magical ritual throughout the ceremony. He whispers chants over the special firewood, and the leaves, used on this night. But, on this occasion, there was little evidence of magical practices to my eye, and the people themselves claim that they have left these ways behind. Still, this ritual has much meaning. The act of sitting by a raging fire takes much commitment, symbolic of the commitment everyone is making to this marriage. If anyone should move away, it is an

indication that they do not want to continue with the marriage. In particular, Dua's willingness to sit close to the fire is her indication of her desire to go on with the marriage.

It is not long before those gathered begin to sweat. Dua herself sweats profusely. Special leaves are taken, and used to mop off the perspiration from her body. Pig grease is rubbed over Dua, and, as the sweat subsequently builds up, the absorbent leaves again wash it off. This process is repeated continually, and takes the name "washing down the bride". At different stages, others join her close to the fire. During this ritual, Dua is not to move from the fire, or to drink water. The reason for this goes back to the magical significance of this event. By magical power, assurance was given that the marriage would be good. Magical chants and spells ensured that the man would not take other wives, and that he would be faithful. Non-cooperation, or failure to perform the ritual correctly, would break the power of the magic.

Dua, herself, said she was unaware of the significance of the ritual. The older people freely told the meaning of the magical practices, once performed, but insisted that now they did this, just because it was a tradition. I would suggest that, even though the magical performances have ceased, the ritual still retains its meaning for the participants. I believe it provided Dua with a measure of assurance, as she faced the frightening experience of marriage. It assured her of acceptance in her husband's line – something vital to the happiness of her marriage. The ritual of washing also indicated a cleansing inside and out, in preparation for the marriage. There is certainly potential for this meaning to become a major part of this ceremony.

Of course, John's line has not come to this ceremony without the offering of food. A pig has been killed, and presented to Dua's line, as a sign of friendship. In return, food is offered to John's line, for exchange of food is a seal of any transaction.

Singing

Throughout the ritual, there is singing and chanting. The older men from Dua's line chant words of advice and instruction about the way

she should behave in marriage, and the responsibilities of marriage. The women, who have married into her clan, instruct her in the need for hard work, and the necessity of providing food for members of the groom's line. As the fire dies down, songs are sung until early morning. Some of these are special songs of the ancestors, asking for blessing on the marriage. Farewells are sung to the bird leaving its nest, a picture of the bride, leaving her line to join the line of her husband. In fact, this whole ceremony has been a symbolic severing of the ties of the past, in preparation for her new life.

The Bride

About 10 am the following morning, after a few hours sleep, preparations begin for the exchange. For the next couple of hours, great care is taken in washing, dressing, and decorating the bride. She wears a new *purpur*, fastened with a wide, bark belt. She, herself, has made a long apron from dyed and woven bush fibres, and possum fur. Red tanket leaves, pleated, and wiped with pig grease, are clustered to form an attractive covering for her buttocks. Her body is smeared with pig grease, until it shines a beautiful golden brown. Her face is painted with circles, lines, and dots of all colours. Intricately-woven anklets and wristlets hold more leaves, to add to her decoration. The fur of a possum goes around her neck, with the tail hanging down her front. Beads are added.

As a reminder of Western influence, Dua adds dye, several safely pins, and some coloured glitter paper. At the same time, another woman is decorated in a similar fashion. Her name is Maria, a

"mother" of John. She joins Dua in all the activities that follow, acting as a type of bridesmaid.

Kina on a String

While all this was going on, a relative painstakingly threaded 100 K2 notes onto string. She will give this gift from her line to her husband's line, in the first weeks of being with them. Once again, it is a means of assuring her acceptance in her new line. Her father says it will help soften hurt felt by John's line in departing with so much money on this day. The money is draped around her body for all to see. At first, the women from Dua's line decorated her, but now many others are involved, and a crowd gathers to watch the final touches being put to her adornment. Young girls, beautifully decorated, stand by watching. This is their opportunity to display their beauty, and claim that they are potential brides.

The crowning of her decoration is surely her headdress. Her relatives place a knitted cap on her woolly hair. It provides an anchor for the many feathers arranged in rows in the cap. The short red parakeet feathers, the orange-fanned bird of paradise plumes, and the beautiful, long, black single bird of paradise feathers, together, form this spectacular decoration that, in itself, is a significant display of wealth. This, too, will be given to the relatives of the groom.

Magic

During this decoration, I saw no visible sign of magical practices. Later I was told that Dua was, at one stage, taken into a house, where leaders gathered to school her. The local magic man was present. He squeezed pig grease over her hair, while whispering his chants. If the grease ran straight down her face, then the marriage would be good, but if it ran down the side of her face, she would fight with her husband. I am told that the latter happened. (After a year's reflection, this has been proved true, affirming the validity of the method, and the magic man.) I heard this story from only one informant. There is an obvious reluctance to talk with the missionary about any of these things happening today. I have been told that, in the past, magical charms were said over the paint, grease, and plumes, to cause them to

shine with the blessing of the spirits, also a magic potion was given to the bride to ensure marital faithfulness.

The Wedding Ceremony

And so, in all her beauty, Dua waits behind the bush houses of her village, because it is not yet time for her to appear. Attention now shifts to the open area in the middle of the village. Here, the exchange will take place. Visitors are inspecting the 20 cooked pigs, arranged side by side on banana leaves, so that the snouts are all facing in the same direction. The entrails are dumped unceremoniously on top of the cooked halves of pig. This has been carefully prepared as a gift of food for John's line. It is also a sign that the line is capable of looking after pigs, a trait essential, if the bride is to find favour with her in-laws.

About 2 pm, those gathered hear shouts and cries in the distance. These grow louder, until, finally, the relatives of the bridegroom are seen slowly making their way, dancing and singing, towards the village. With their unified, mad outbursts of war whoop, the warriors, decked out in magnificent headdresses, with faces splashed with paint, rush towards the open area, advancing in a vicious and realistic war dance. This is a great display of their strength and power as a clan. Some say the vigorous action of the advancing warriors is an attempt to chase away the spirits, who might interfere with the ceremony. With the swirling of their ten-foot long spears, and the twirling of their axes, in quickening, lightened steps, they advance and retreat, alternately. An uninformed spectator could be forgiven for thinking that a full-scale battle is about to take place.

Behind the warriors, the women, also highly decorated, follow, carrying cooked halves of pig high on their heads. The men carry long bamboo poles, decorated with money: paper notes of all denominations. There are several circular display frames, about five feet in diameter, constructed of woven canes, and tied with green vines. These are carried by strong picketers on six-foot high poles, so that all can see them. The outer edges are decorated with plumes of the bird of paradise, shells, and possum fur. Hundreds of paper notes are slipped under the single strands of woven cane. On this occasion,

K4,000 was displayed on these frames and poles – quite an impressive display of wealth. The bride's line will receive this bride price, or bride wealth. It is not really a payment, but an exchange – and exchange of the most highly-valued objects of wealth in this society: women, pigs, and money. It is a compensation, paid to the bride's family, because of the potential in her, as a worker and child bearer, which they are losing in offering her to the other line.

When the apparently enraged warriors reach their destination, just as suddenly as the dance began, it comes to an abrupt halt. In one body, a terrific male booming shout is sounded, the well-decorated frames are presented, and their posts secured in the ground. All this has taken place while the bride's line has sat expressionless, and in silence, on the far side of the *singsing* ground.

The Exchange

Now comes the exchange. Firstly, the negotiator, the bride's uncle receives his share of the bride price for the task he has done, to everyone's approval. A man of great oratory ability, called a rhetoric thumper, rises, and makes a speech to the bride's line concerning the value of the wealth they are giving for the bride. This includes about 30 cooked pigs, already laid out on banana leaves. In the past, other articles, such as shells, plumes, axes, spades, bush knives, and silver shillings would make up the bride wealth. These would have been spread on a blanket, and proudly displayed. However, today, it is the kina paper notes that are highly valued, and attract the attention of all.

Several orators make their long speeches, while strutting vigorously backwards and forwards, eight or so paces, as they chant and swing their axes. As the groom's line speaks of the value of the wealth they have brought, it is proudly displayed. One pole is raised high. "Here is K500 that we have attached to this pole. We give this great wealth to you." Then the pole is handed to the bride's line. This is done with singing, shouting, and play-acting. The pole bearer pretends to hand it over, and then takes it, and retreats several steps. The receiver follows. Then the giver advances again, pretending to hand over the pole, as the receiver retreats. This process continues until the pole is finally handed over, and bearer retreats to his place, as shouts of

delight rise from the crowd. I expect that this performance symbolises the great cost to the line, in parting with the wealth. They certainly will be expecting something good in return.

The orator from Dua's line then rises to assure them of the virtues of their girl, and then proceeds to tell them how they should look after her. With this, cooked pigs are presented to the groom's line, and some of the money is returned to them. This is like a counter-gift. This return transaction initiates the affinal relationship, and emphasises its chief characteristic – friendly reciprocity. In more pragmatic terms, the headman recognises that this generosity on his part will go a long way towards ensuring his daughter's acceptance in her new family, and may help to compensate for some of her inevitable weaknesses! All the speeches given emphasise the cementing roles of marriage, as these two groups are brought together. There are repeated reminders to both groups of the mutual responsibilities that are now theirs, as intermarrying groups.

At this point in the traditional ceremony, a pastor rises to read the Word of God, and give a short explanation of Christian marriage. Neither John nor Dua are Christian, but Arim has just recently given his life over to the Lord, and so, is keen to see the name of God heard on this special occasion.

The Bridal March

Finally, comes the bridal march. The feather-bedecked and grease-smeared bride, with her "mother-in-law", approach the *singsing* area, performing the dance called *troim-away leg*, which consists of tiny, vigorous movements of the legs backwards. The dancers move in a circle, slowly advancing a little with each turn. All the while, each one twirls an axe to the beat of the dance. Women rush forward, screaming noisily, and shaking hands, thus welcoming the bride into their tribe. Finally, the noise stops, and all are still. Slowly, one by one, the female relatives of Dua step forward, and solemnly press money into her hand as a personal gift. The only noise to be heard is an occasional sob, as emotions soar high. This is a very sad moment, as her close relatives say their final good-byes to one, who has been such a part of their lives. There is no such display from the men, even

her father. Dua, in fact, will live in the district, and be seen with great frequency, but, even so, she will no longer be part of them, but will belong to the other line.

Again, the dancing begins, for now the climax is reached. Dua is to be given to the groom's line. Dua and Maria are placed high on the shoulders of strong men. With much shouting and singing, they are raced backwards and forwards between the two lines in a similar performance to the one seen in the giving of the money. Finally, as her line decides to let her go, she is delivered to her new line. Again, this hesitancy is symbolic of the cost of giving Dua in this way. A big piece of pig fat is held high, and Dua, and her new relatives, bite pieces from the grease, together, as they dance, sing, and shout. This is the symbolic sealing of the exchange.

There only remains the task of dividing the wealth. The following day, the father and uncle see that all Dua's line receive an appropriate amount. One "brother", actually a distant cousin in our terms, claimed to receive K20.

The Groom

In all this, the groom was not to be seen. Some said he was hiding behind the bamboo, but I did not spot him. It seemed that no one was interested in him. In fact, he has had little to do with the whole event. In some cases, the groom may be away at the coast working, not even aware that he is being married off to a girl he doesn't even know. This highlights the fact that marriage is not an individual affair, but a community one. Marriage not only encourages and maintains friendly relationships between groups, but also is a means of increasing tribal strength. The communal nature of this social transaction is seen in the group-courting ceremonies, the choosing of the bride by the group, the transactions between the groups, the contribution that all make to the bride price, and in the participation of the communities in the actual exchanges.

Western Weddings

In all this, it is obvious that there are big differences between an individualistic Western-style wedding, centred on the bride and groom, and the traditional Mid-Wahgi ceremony, centred on the groups. Yet, as Western influence spreads, it is common to see a wedding following the Western pattern. The bride, attended by bridesmaids, will be dressed in white, with a veil and a bouquet. After the exchange of vows, the bridal party will line up to have photographs taken. A wedding reception will follow, complete with the cutting of the cake and toasts. Many Christians, in desiring to have a Christian wedding, have accepted the Western form in totality. This has often been done with little thought about what could be a Christian Melanesian wedding. So, to conclude this account, I would like to raise some questions, in an attempt to stimulate Papua New Guineans to struggle with these issues to find a meaningful Melanesian wedding ceremony.

Christian Weddings

What can Christians retain of the traditional ceremony? Certainly, dress. A Melanesian bride can be truly Christian, without donningWestern bridal fashion. A Christian girl may not feel comfortable bare-breasted, but, if so, this can be overcome by a simple top, made of traditional materials. If the bride was not willing to wear traditional village dress, then the dress of the towns, a *laplap* and *meri* blouse would be very appropriate.

What about the bride price? Should a Christian family demand a bride price for their daughter? To Western thinking, the purchase of a bride is a repulsive practice. However, the meaning and significance of the bride price should be understood, before it is condemned. The bride price acknowledges the value of womanhood, and gives expression of the girl's worth and quality. It acts as a stabiliser for the marriage. It provides security for each partner. Because of the bride price, the whole community has a stake in the marriage, one line having given, the other having received. Therefore, the community is responsible to see that the marriage works. A breakdown in marriage is not only the couple's decision; the whole community is involved, for the bride

price will have to be returned. Therefore, each person will do all they can to support the marriage, and help the couple through the hard times. With such value in this custom, there is no need for it to be discarded. However, control is necessary, so that exorbitant prices are not demanded. Here, the church could have a role in regulating and controlling such exchanges.

Could the church also play a role in the matching of partners? The Western fashion of individual choice, based on emotions, may not be the ideal. Christian parents, pastors, and church leaders could be acting positively, in taking the initiative to arrange Christian marriages, with the approval of the young people. The church certainly has a responsibility in providing suitable courting activities, before God, for its young people.

The Christian community can continue to play an important part in the wedding ceremony. Their commitment to the marriage should be just as strong as in the traditional ceremony, and a visible means of expressing this commitment need to be developed. Gifts between lines could be given, speeches could be made, and verbal responses to each other could be read. A Christian Melanesian wedding ceremony needs to continue to be a union between groups, and not just the witnessing of the two individuals being united. The dimensions of commitment of the couple to God, and to each other, need to be introduced also.

The tradition of speech-making provides excellent opportunity, within the wedding, for Christian instruction to the bride, the groom, and both lines, on the meaning of Christian marriage, and the responsibilities of all involved. This teaching could be presented in the traditional form used by the skilled orator.

The washing of the bride need not be a ceremony that is discarded, but one that could be filled with new meaning. This brings us to the question of the meaning behind the traditional forms I have described here. Form and meaning need to be separated. It would be ideal to retain the old forms of the wedding ceremony, and to introduce new meanings that are Christian. For example, the washing of the bride

could continue to be a meaningful expression of commitment, on the part of the bride, and both lines involved. Intercession to God could be made for the success of the marriage. The Lordship of Christ, in the family and home, could be taught during the ritual, as the elders schooled the couple in Christian ways. Songs, expressing the meaning of Christian marriage, could be sung. In the situation described in this article, there appears to be an excellent opportunity to introduce new meanings. Dua, herself, did not understand the meaning of many of the things done at her wedding. The older men and women know the meaning of the magical practices, but, it seems that this is not being communicated to the younger generation. Forms are being performed for tradition's sake. The village has recently turned to Christianity. This is the time for Christian meaning to be introduced to the old forms.

This will not always be the case, and care must be taken. If the old meaning, associated with spirit beliefs, is still vivid, then it is not a simple matter of substituting a new meaning. The association of the form with the old meaning is still there in the minds of the people. For the bride to be washed down, while chanting prayers to God, may be acceptable culturally and theologically. However, it may pose real problems for those involved, as their thoughts automatically turn to the spirits, and the need to seek their favour for blessing on human affairs. In this case, a new form may need to be developed, which expresses the concept of cleansing, and preparation for marriage. Then, into this, could be incorporated Christian prayers and chants. Yet, it should still be uniquely Melanesian, and not Western. Decisions in these areas must be in the hands of Melanesians themselves.

Conclusion

Only Melanesians can develop a meaningful wedding ceremony for Melanesians. Yet, the missionary has a part to play. He, firstly, must stimulate national Christians to grapple with these things. They must understand that Western forms of marriage are not necessarily Christian. The missionary's attitude to his own Western forms, and traditional Melanesian forms, will certainly convey a message of

acceptance, or rejection, which national Christians are likely to imitate. Clear teaching on Christian marriage needs to be given. Alternatives can be suggested, guidelines given, and innovations from other areas shared. However, ultimately, it is their task to take the teaching of scripture, and their traditional ways, and allow them to interact, so that the result is a meaningful Christian Melanesian wedding ceremony.

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