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Chapter 9

What does the story of Gami illustrate about (a) changing patterns of Gebusi sister-exchange, (b) the ability of Gebusi women to make their own marital choices, and (c) the dilemma faced by outsiders such as anthropologist when they try to help local people?

In less than two decades, much of Gebusi life has changed due to Western influence. For instance, “not one of the 16 marriages in the community between 1982 and 1998 was considered sister-exchange,” which was arguably the most culturally acceptable method for marriage at one point (156). On Knauft’s first exposure to Gebusi settlements in the 1980s, he does mention that lovers can marry out of romance, though it was rare, and socially frowned upon. In Chapter 9 of his book regarding the Gebusi, he finds himself in ethical hot water by not just telling the story, but in some aspect becoming the story, as he publicly takes a stand on a sensitive topic, and plays an intermediary role in the life of a young Gebusi woman. Knauft admits in one point “the best intentions can sometimes have the worst of results,” (165).

“Even in the old days [sic] some woman had refused to be married,” said returning researcher, Bruce Knauft to a crowd of Gebusi Natives (162).

For all intents and purposes, this ‘*town meeting*,’ was concerning a very serious issue within the Gebusi settlement Knauft was stationed at. The outcome of this matter would likely create a new precedent. The changing pattern regarding marriage was on the agenda as a young

Gebusi woman, Gami, attempted to ‘repudiate,’ her marriage shortly after consummation. It is a fact that throughout the 80s and 90s since Knauft’s last visit the Gebusi have been thrust into a more modern lifestyle, which included Christian teachings and some reframing of woman’s rights.

“[C]ontemporary romance reflected not just new standards of courtship but new material demand for young men,” (158).

The traditional practice of sister-exchange or marriage via reciprocity of bridewealth (brideprice) was becoming a thing of the past. It was now becoming common for young Gebusi men to engage in the practice of ‘allure,’ they attended disco dance functions to find “marriageable women from another community,” to attract (157). In Gasumi Corners, the area Knauft conducted field work, the basic economy for brideprice between 1982-98 for first marriages “was only 56 kina, or 28 dollars,” which went to the closest living male relative of the bride (158). It is understood that Gami, appeared enthusiastic about marriage at first, but was later discovered that she was not romantically interested in her first husband.

“Failing sister-exchange marriage, the brothers or fathers of young women said they would be satisfied only with a large cash payment from the would-be groom,” (158).

Nevertheless, Gami followed the socio-cultural norms at the time for the marriage including consummation, but something happened shortly after that to lead her to openly repudiate the marriage. This action caused uproar, that led to the public shaming and even detention of Gami to influence her position. She was doffed of her clothing, for public shaming, and when that did not produce the intended result, family members took her to the Nomad Police Station on charges of immorality. Clearly even at this time with a culture sprinting toward

modernity, it continues to be “a serious matter for a Gebusi woman to consummate her marriage and then repudiate it,” testing the limitation a Gebusi women's autonomy (160).

“Following Gebusi customs each young woman was ‘seized’ by the wrist and led away by a male kinsman of her husband-to-be,” (159).

Anthropologists are charged to ethically conduct fieldwork without the interference of personal judgement or influencing the natural progression of a culture. In the hit TV show / movie Star Trek, this was known as the “*Prime Directive*,” which was tantamount to the science-fictional show’s success, lasting many seasons and sparking different spinoffs. As an analogy, it might be useful to consider the implications of introducing an undeveloped world to mind-blowing technology. In a realistic sense, it is the same thing. A culture or society can only withstand so much influence at a time before it begins to erode its own cultural heritage.

Bruce Knauft correctly states that “[w]estern intervention among foreign peoples has often spawned unfortunate results,” because there is no real way of knowing how a group of people will react, when the variables are so far out of their domain of understanding (165). Gami’s generation in Gebusi life was already under the modern influence of colonialism and Christianity, the male initiation ritual had gone out of style and was no longer talked about. Gebusi men now seek new methods for finding a marriage partner. Whether it is marriage by choice, or companion marriage, the institution of marriage being a part of life still existed among the Gebusi. The surprise to many, was Gami’s decision to walk away from those cultural standards, and forge a new path as a free, independent, and at least in this circumstance, sexual, young woman.