A Melanesian Wedding: Santa Cruz Island

by William Davenport

Marriage is a social institution that appears to be universal to all human societies, but only some societies mark the event with a public celebration, that is, a wedding. Among those societies that do celebrate a wedding ceremony, there is a great deal of variation. Surely one of the most distinctive and colorful wedding ceremonies to be found among the tribal societies of the southwest Pacific (Melanesia) is that of the people of Santa Cruz Island (see Fig. 5). Santa Cruz weddings are unique because they involve large transactions in an exotic and spectacular kind of money, red-feather currency.

This is a society that requires the payment by the groom’s kin of a very substantial amount of money, called brideprice or bridewealth by anthropologists, to the bride’s family. This is not a purchase price involving rights of ownership. On the contrary, a bridewealth payment is an act of trust that acknowledges both the special interests that the groom’s family has in enabling one of its men to acquire a wife and the filial

Fig. 1 (above left): Senior male kin of the bride inspect rolls of red-feather currency as they negotiate the bridewealth in the groom’s village.

Fig. 2: The negotiations are nearly over; the stack of currency rolls on the left have already been accepted by the bride’s kin.

The bunches of green nuts on the floor are areca palm nuts (kava), one of the ingredients for the stimulant betel.

Fig. 3 (left): Relatives of the groom prepare to wrap each roll of currency in a length of new cotton cloth.

Fig. 4a: On the wedding day ten women serve as carriers of the bridewealth to the senior male relative of the bride.

Fig. 4b: The line of carriers is directed to walk along the beach so as to pass in front of the men’s houses.

Fig. 4c: Units of bridewealth are taken inside the senior relative’s house. Soon after, the units will be turned over to their intended recipients.
interests that the bride's family has in her and the wish of its members that she become a wife and eventually a mother.

In Santa Cruz Island society the wedding is a rite de passage that has double sociological significance for the bride. She not only moves from single to married status, she also changes from the legal status of a minor to that of full adult. The difference is marked linguistically by two opposed nouns: *ina* for a single female, *ina* for a married woman.

**The Intricacies of Bridewealth Payment**

After a wedding has been agreed upon by the close kin of the bride and groom, the first phase of the rite is a face-to-face negotiation of the bridewealth. Santa Cruz cultural convention dictates that a bridewealth payment be made up of ten monetary units of graded value: the least valuable unit is referred to as "number 10" and the unit of highest value designated as "the bottom." A coil of red-feather currency (*tano*) suitable for the bottom piece should be nearly flawless, that is, the red-feather down that covers its top side should have a consistent, rich red color and be completely free of damage or defects caused by smoke from household fires and infestations of vermin. The next highest unit, called "number 2," should have a comparative monetary value of one-half the value of the bottom unit, the "number 3," half the value of the "number 2," and so on down in value to "number 10."

This can be considered a true monetary system because there is a standard equivalency of value between the currency and a basic commodity: a top-value piece of red-feather currency (suitable for the bottom unit of bridewealth) is worth one fully grown pig, either a sow or a castrated male.

A set of ten graded units of red-feather currency is referred to as a *ngosolu*, the "head of a supernatural being," because it has great power (like that of a supernatural being or deity) to accomplish something difficult (i.e., convince relatives to release a daughter to become a wife or pay wereagid in order to end a blood feud).

When a wedding is announced close relatives and friends of the prospective groom will pledge to be responsible for one of the bridewealth units. It is assumed that a father (his heir or a surrogate) will contribute the bottom unit, brothers and paternal uncles the next most valuable units, and so on down the scale, with friends and well-wishers pledging to contribute the units of least value. A man who pledges to contribute a specified unit may not have that much available wealth or may not wish to pay the unit by himself, so he will solicit help from his friends. Women may also wish to contribute, but etiquette demands that they remain in the background, so they will contribute indirectly through one of the male contributors.

Payment of bridewealth (with its special verb *ri*—it is semantically set apart from the verb *go*—"to buy" or "to purchase") is a reciprocal transaction: the groom's family and friends will receive a like payment in the future when one of their unmarried females weds (or if it may have been received already if, say, the groom had an elder sister who married first). Thus, no matter what relationship a person has with the groom, he or she can be certain that the amount contributed will come back through a bridewealth payment on behalf of a female relative. Technically, no one should make a profit or sustain a severe loss through bridewealth contributions, neither the father who has more daughters than sons nor the father with fewer. A man with more daughters will cross kin lines and contribute heavily as a friend; and a man with more sons will call on a wider circle of relatives and friends to help him.

**The Procession and the Feast**

Actual face-to-face negotiations of a bridewealth payment take place in the dwelling of the groom's father or father surrogate. The principal kin of the bride come there to consider the offerings made for each unit, beginning with the bottom unit (Figs. 1, 2). This is more or less a public affair, the onlookers serving as witnesses should any misunderstandings develop. This usually takes most of one day, but sometimes it may run over into a second day.

Once the bridewealth negotiations are concluded, a day is set for the actual wedding, which has two parts: the delivery of the bridewealth from the groom's parents' dwelling to the bride's parents' dwelling (these are usually in different villages) followed immediately by the escorting of the bride to the groom's parents' dwelling. This reciprocal exchange of bridewealth for the bride will be in the morning. It will be followed in the afternoon by a large feast hosted by the bride's family and her entire village, to which everyone in the bride's and groom's villages is invited. A great many others will attend also.

For the delivery of the bridewealth each piece of currency is partially wrapped in a 6-foot length of new cotton cloth (Fig. 3). The currency is supposed to be received by a male relative of the
“A set of ten graded units of red-feather currency is referred to as a ngadukna, the 'head of a supernatural being,' because it has great 'power.'”

However, the men do not remain totally removed from the hilarity. As the women are engaged in their game of smearimg each other with turmeric, the younger men will emerge from the men’s houses to watch the hi-jinks. And very soon, some of the unmarried women will break ranks and try to smear the men’s heads, at which point the normal restraints that keep men and women from interacting break down. As some men protest at being smeared, more and more women will gang up on them until they succeed, all this to whoops and holters from the onlookers.

By the time the merriment reaches its peak, it will be getting dark. Older women, particularly those with several children in tow, will begin to leave and this cues others to think about returning to their home villages. Neither bride nor groom has put in an appearance during the feast, and in fact the groom was not to be seen in the morning when the bridewealth was being delivered. Both were at separate locations in the village’s street, with her new mother-in-law, he in his men’s house with other men who did not choose to attend the feast.

Changing Relationships

A wedding brings about still other sociological transformations for both the husband and wife. A man acting as organizer and payer of the bottom unit becomes the active "father" of the husband, regardless of what their relationship was before. In some instances this can be understood better if it is regarded as a kind of adoption. If a biological father (or his surrogate) cannot contribute the bottom unit of bridewealth for his son, he is in default of an important obligation of a "father," so he must yield his parental status to whomever pays that unit. That payer becomes the sociological father of the groom. Payment of lesser units establishes one as an uncle, a brother, a cousin, and the same applies to those who received units of bridewealth on behalf of the bride.

Payment of a bridewealth unit also establishes a legal interest in the marriage, and collectively all payers are thought to be the "makers" or "enablers" of that marriage. Furthermore, in terms of this cultural logic, the enablers are entitled to share in one of the consequences of the marriage, namely the offspring. One such acknowledgment is to allow the payer of the bottom unit to name the first child, after himself if it is a boy, after his wife if it is a girl. The same applies to the payer of the second unit and the second child, and so on.

when the line again turns toward the beach and parades in front of the men’s houses, and so on until it arrives at the dwelling of the bride’s parents. There the line is met by the bride’s father, who is helped to remove the coils of feather currency from the carriers’ heads and place them inside his dwelling (Fig. 4c). Some of the bridewealth is set aside and supplemented with a few medium-value pieces to make up a special gift to the bride, which she will carry on her head as she is accompanied to her new residence (Fig. 6). This is supposed to be a small nucleus of wealth which hopefully will grow as time goes by. As the bride emerges from her parents’ house and the gift is balanced on her head, a loud celebratory cheer will go up, marking the end of the wedding rite itself. As the bride is preparing to leave her parents’ house, several young men will unobtrusively deliver a whole cooked pig, buttered and packaged in fresh leaves, to the groom’s father in his village as a personal gift from the bride’s father. This gift calls for no direct reciprocation and is intended to acknowledge that a new formal relationship now exists between the co-fathers-in-law. The bride’s father from here on will consider himself to be indebted, therefore in an inferior social status, to the groom’s father and will always pay him deference when they meet.

That afternoon, people from the groom’s village will gradually drift over to the village of the bride’s parents for a feast. Men will congregate inside and around the men’s houses, women will form one or two large informal groups outside in the vicinity of the bride’s parents dwelling (Fig. 7). The young men of the host village will serve the food (Fig. 8), first to the women, which is the reverse order of a normal household meal. This puts the women in the status of honored guests.

“...the bride’s father from here on will consider himself to be indebted, therefore in an inferior social status, to the groom’s father.”
automatically transforms the mother into a recognized wife. Another legal avenue might be for the father of the unmarried mother to claim the illegitimate child as his and his wife's, and in biological terms the child would become a sibling of its mother (the same situation as when a senior sponsor opts to adopt his junior namesake). Another option, which ceased to exist when European-style law and order were established, was infanticide.

In traditional Santa Cruz Island society, the wedding is a rite of passage with multiple significances: it conveys majority legal status on both husband and wife; it defines and confirms the persons who will from then on be the couple's close and active relatives; and it establishes for each child a unique namesake relationship that, if circumstances warrant, can be converted to a parental one.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Davenport, William

**WILLIAM DAVENPORT** is Curator Emeritus of the Oceanian Section of UPM, and lives in Maryland. For this article he went back to his field notes and photographs of 1959, when he first worked in the Santa Cruz Islands and they were still quite isolated. His only comments on this field trip, his second to the South Pacific, were, "I wish we could still do ethnographic field work like that nowadays. It was really fun."