Marriage Practices
in
Lowland South America

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KENNETH M. KENSINGER

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A Husband for His Daughter, a Wife for Her Son: Strategies for Selecting a Set of In-laws among the Kalapalo

ELLEN B. BASSO

The culture of the Kalapalo Indians includes a set of kinship terms which may be ordered along two dimensions of contrast, that of "kinship" and that of "affinability" (see Figure 1). Reference to "kinship" allows a member of the society to classify kin so that only generational distinctions are made. These generational divisions refer not to the relative age of kin but to successive ascendancy and descendancy of sibling sets (*ifisúandaw*) who are linked to each other by ties of matrifiliation and/or patrifiliation. By referring to "affinability," a speaker distinguishes among kinsmen within these generational sets so as to yield categories defined as "spouse exchangers." Depending upon the situation, a Kalapalo may designate the same individual as a "kinsman" or as a "spouse exchanger," or (s)he may classify differently two persons who occupy the same genealogical kin-type position.

With reference to this system of alternate classification, the only statement Kalapalo make about marriage is that persons who are classed as *ifándaw* ("spouse exchangers at ego's generation") are the only kinds of kinsmen who can legitimately become spouses (*iŋiso*) and lovers (*ajo*). These relationships should not occur between other kinds of kinsmen.[1]

However, the Kalapalo cannot clearly state why *ifándaw* are appropriate spouses and lovers, and are unable to explain why they identify certain kin as potential affines and designate others as unaffinable. Yet it is clear that all Kalapalo make decisions about affinability in choosing spouses for their offspring and lovers for themselves. They must decide who among their kin are affinable and then select among several possible

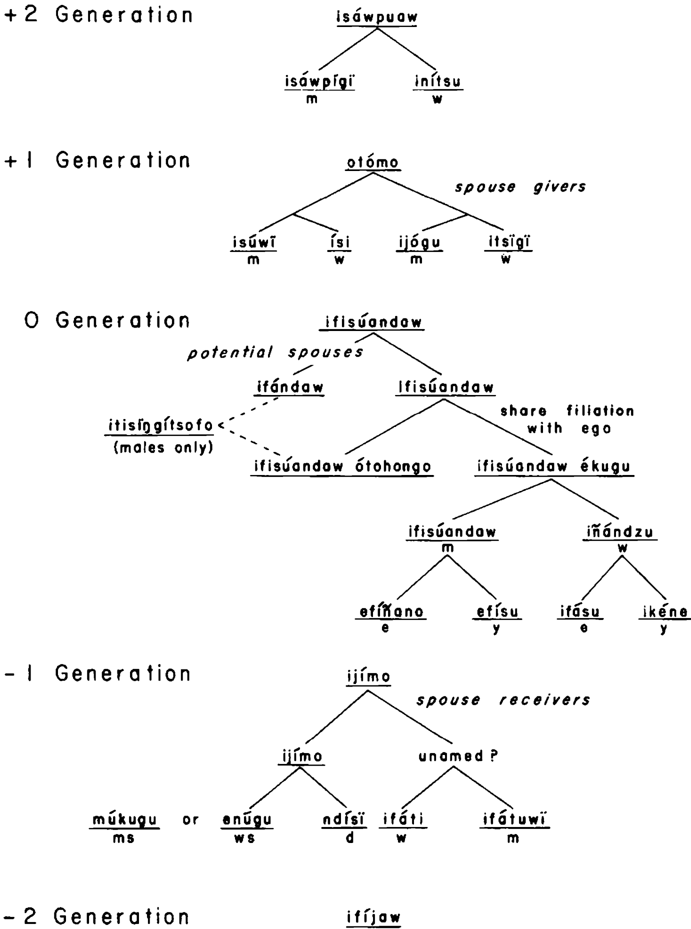

FIGURE 1. KALAPALO KINSHIP CATEGORIES.

affines (including those who are nonrelatives). What, then, are the criteria upon which these decisions are made? Are there benefits that accrue to spouse exchangers possessing certain qualities that mark them as "affinable"? If so, what are the strategies for gaining the maximum possible benefits from a marriage alliance?

It is clear from the way Kalapalo use kinship terms that these are intimately linked with ideas about relationships between people, especially norms (rules for behavior) and moral meanings that indicate the appropriateness or inappropriateness of certain kinds of behavior. Norms and morals are inseparable from the definitions of Kalapalo kinship

categories, as they are inseparable from the general Kalapalo notion of "kinship." Thus ideas about relationships and behavior are critical for understanding how kinship terms are used to classify individuals. To understand more precisely the meaning of affinability, we must examine Kalapalo ideas about proper kinship behavior in general, and indicate how these norms are applied in different situations.

The Kalapalo understand all kin to be involved in a continual reciprocal relationship of *ifutisu,* that is, supportive behavior including sharing food and possessions, assisting in communal projects, and verbally defending relatives who have been accused of serious crimes, especially witchcraft. Enactment of these norms indicates that kin have "respect" for one another. Yet despite this ideal code, some persons clearly show more intense *ifutisu* for their kin than do others. Similarly, *ifutisu* relationships are often skewed so that a person receives more deference than (s)he displays. Precisely who among the members of an individual's kindred are involved in relationships of greater *ifutisu* than they receive varies considerably, according to several specific factors.

To begin with, certain kinds of kinship and affinal relationships are defined in terms of normative conduct that requires deference on the part of one member of the dyad. For example, children are expected to defer to the opinions and decisions of their parents, and younger siblings to their elders. Similarly, among affines, a newly married son- or daughter-in-law must defer to the parents-in-law. As a result of these inegalitarian normative obligations, individuals tend to receive greater *ifutisu* from certain kin than they show those persons. In addition, a few Kalapalo receive more respect from a wider set of kin than do the majority. Most Kalapalo have only a few kin who display greater deference than they receive, the majority of a person's relatives being on a relatively "equal" *ifutisu* relationship with him. In any case, the number of a person's subservient relatives is to a great extent the consequences of genealogical fortuities, such as the number of living siblings an individual happens to have, how many children (s)he has, and, of these, how many are male, how many female. However, Kalapalo men who have relatively large numbers of deferential relatives (both kin and affines) tend to be faction leaders because they can command the support of a sizable group of people during disputes over village representation, witchcraft accusations, and decisions about the movement of the community. Therefore, the ideal *ifutisu* relationship, expressed as equal and reciprocal, is modified by the complexity of actual ties between individual kin, with consequences for political organization.

Political relations are not, however, the only determinant of the degree of *ifutisu* one relative actually shows toward another. Persons who are

socially distant from one another have ties of relatively less *ifutisu* than do those who are socially proximate. Social distance is a consequence of four hierarchically related principles that form a graded series of decreasing importance. These are residence, factional support, village affiliation, and language group affiliation.

First, regardless of how they are related to one another, relatives who live in the same household must continually share food and material possessions. Also, they tend to present a "common front" against other households, particularly with respect to the jealous guarding of possessions, food, and spouses. Thus members of the same household most closely adhere to the ideal *ifutisu* relationship by continually enacting the norms of kinship behavior on a daily basis.

Second, relatives who support the same faction leader, though they may live in different households, tend to participate more often in communal work groups organized by their leader, and therefore have more interests in common, than do kinsmen who belong to different factions. For example, members of the same faction often work together for substantial periods of time on some subsistence project (such as a major fishing expedition) the products of which will be distributed equitably among them. In these situations men and women work together for their common good. Similarly, because factions are the vehicle for witchcraft accusations, such persons tend to agree with one another about who is a witch, and thus support each other during periods of intense anxiety brought about by sudden illness or a suspicious death.

Third, relatives who live in the same settlement, though they may be members of different factions and household groups, have more frequent contacts than do those who live in different settlements, simply because of physical proximity and the common participation in settlement-wide activity. Yet persons who belong to the same settlement, but to different factions and households, are socially distant in that they are not obligated to one another in the same way that common faction or household members are. In other words, Kalapalo feel allegiance primarily to persons in their own households or factions, and only secondarily to kin in different groups.

Finally, relatives who live in different places but speak the same language are socially closer (simply because they can communicate verbally) than are relatives who belong to settlements speaking different languages. The latter might be described as the most socially distant of all a person's relatives.

It is clear that the simple fact of kinship relatedness does not imply solidarity or obligation, despite the ideal norms of *ifutisu*. As a consequence, it is possible to rank any person's kin in terms of their proximity.

Kin who live together in the same household, and who therefore belong to the same faction, the same settlement, and who speak the same language, are at one end of the continuum, that of the most intense *ifutisu* relationship. Individuals who fall within the socially proximate ranges of this continuum are invariably classed as non-affinable kin. Therefore, we can say that one important meaning of affinability in Kalapalo terms is the relative lack of *ifutisu* ties between persons who are supposed to enact the norms of kinship behavior. Similarly, persons who are not affinable are those kin who are relatively strong *ifutisu* relationships that are a consequence of social proximity.[2]

Given this basic meaning of affinability, why does a person's social distance make him or her an acceptable affine? What is the advantage to a Kalapalo of selecting socially distant kin as spouse exchangers? The answer to this problem lies, I believe, in Kalapalo marriage norms themselves.

Kalapalo marriage is, in the first place, an alliance between sibling sets (*ifisúandaw*) who are considered suitable spouse exchangers because of their social distance, not because of some *a priori* exchange relationship. These sibling sets are those of the parents of the individuals who marry, as well as those of the spouses themselves. Reciprocity between these sets is precisely defined. Rights transferred include (1) the reciprocal exchange of spouses among persons in a particular generation (which includes the original or initiating marriage and further levirate, sororate, and brother-sister exchange [*itsahene*] marriages), and among persons in succeeding generations (in conformance to an ideal rule of brother-in-law/sister-in-law marriage, or *itsahene* marriage), and (2) the continual exchange of material wealth and assistance between sibling sets of the two generations involved. We can properly view the latter obligation, in particular, as an especially stringent set of *ifutisu* norms; indeed, the Kalapalo refer to the relationship between affines as *ifutisu ekugu,* "great" or "strong," *ifutisu.*

Kalapalo marriage must also be seen as a contractual alliance between two individuals who are classed as "spouses." Here, reciprocal sexual and economic obligations define their relationship as distinctive and unique among persons of the opposite sex. Sexual obligations are necessary because of the demands of one's kinsmen for spouses, faction members, assistants for communal labor, and contributors of wealth. Since children are, in the Kalapalo view, directly a consequence of repeated sexual activity, the latter activity is a responsibility of persons who are married. Similarly, reciprocal economic duties not only encompass the individual marriage partner but incorporate obligations to the kin of one's spouse as well. If marriage is a social contract, then it is clear that obligations

incurred by spouses are very similar to those incurred by persons who are socially proximate. The latter are in fact bonded by the social contract resulting from common residence and factional affiliation.

If Kalapalo marriage is accepted as a contractual alliance between social units and between individuals, it is possible to understand the advantage of designating socially distant persons rather than those who are close and in strong *ifutisu* relationships. The advantage lies in reinforcing *ifutisu* ties, which are diffuse in the case of socially distant kin. Such reinforcement means the establishment of a marked sense of obligation and reciprocity that is demanded by the norms of affinal relationships. In other words, persons who are socially distant become especially close, even (in terms of the duties imposed upon them) closer than the hithertofore closest members of an individual's kindred. A Kalapalo marriage has the effect of bringing together persons who were previously distant and without *ifutisu* bonds, marking the new relationship as close in a special way, different from, but stronger than, the intense *ifutisu* relationship between socially proximate kin.

The specific advantages in selecting socially distant individuals as spouse exchangers can be seen clearly in two cases of Kalapalo seeking appropriate spouses for their children. In each case the parent was fortunate in having more than one option; several trial selections and false starts were made before a "final" decision (if such ever occurred) was arrived at.

The first case involves the search for a husband for W., a young woman whose parents were affiliated with the Kuikuru village (see Figure 2). In the fall of 1966 the Kalapalo learned that W. had been promised to K., the only son of A., leader (*anetu*) of Aifa. A year before, K.'s first wife had left him and their only child, a boy of seven, to return to the Kuikuru household of her eldest brother and her mother. After failing to convince

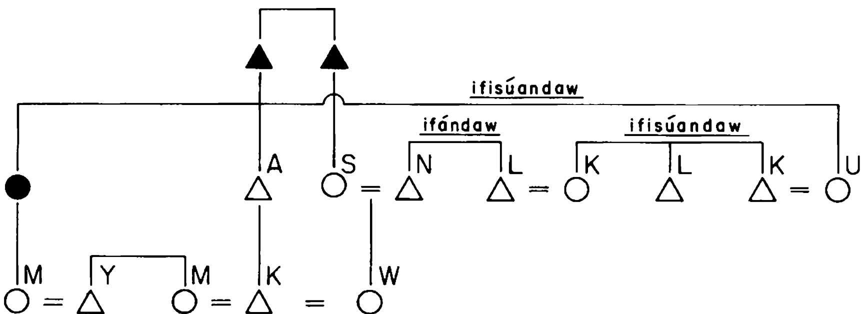

FIGURE 2. SIMPLIFIED GENEALOGICAL RELATIONS IN W.'S CASE.

her to return, K. and his father began to look around for another wife. The arranged marriage between K. and W. was not unusual, because the girl's mother was *ifisuagï* to A., and of sufficient social distance to be an appropriate affine. Thus K. and W. had always been considered "potential spouses" (*ifándaw*). Although K. had two other female *ifándaw* who were as yet unmarried, only one was unengaged. She, however, was a member of the Tupi-speaking Kamaiura. Furthermore, her father was a senior factional leader who would have demanded that K. move to his own settlement. Because A. was also in this political role, K.'s position was one of an "up-and-coming" young man among the Kalapalo group. Thus it would have been difficult for him to move permanently away from his own faction. W. therefore seemed to be the only choice from both K. and A.'s point of view.

The fact that W. had not been committed to a man until her last year of puberty seclusion was quite unusual, however, since most girls are engaged several years before they begin to menstruate. Furthermore, her unengaged status could not have been for lack of suitors, since at the time there were few girls of her age set but many older men who were as yet unmarried. In fact, her father had rejected all the proposals of his fellow villagers, including that of one individual whose relationship to W. was that of "potential spouse." Instead N. chose as a son-in-law a young man who lived in another village, and a person whose own father had been declared a witch. Because of the intense acrimony the new engagement caused in his own settlement, N. found himself in a highly ambiguous position. N. was one of those individuals so common in the Upper Xingú, who find themselves belonging, by reason of birthright or sentiment, to none of the settlements in the area. Allied by kinship to only one man, whose household he shared, he was accused of witchcraft by many of the Kuikuru. This in itself would not have been a problem, since most adult men are accused of this crime by at least some persons, but the fact that N. did not have the support of a large number of relatives, who would block his assassination in the event of a crisis, made him highly vulnerable in case of a sudden death.

On the other hand, N.'s wife S. had several distant kinsmen in Aifa, members of A.'s powerful faction. Thus it was highly advantageous to the parents to arrange a marriage for their daughter with the son of a man who was the leader of this faction. Although this would mean that W. and her parents would have to leave their own settlement permanently to live in Aifa, they would have the advantage of asylum from their Kuikuru antagonists among their Kalapalo affines, leaving behind the single supporting kinsman among the Kuikuru. For S., the move would have the additional advantage of allowing her to live close to her only living kinsmen, especially a "sister" with whom she had close emotional ties.

Finally, the couple would be able to live in the same village as their daughter, thus permitting them to make demands from K., a new son-in-law. In any case, N.'s insistence upon living in Aifa, in the very house of his son-in-law, was inconsistent with his own social position. Behaving as if he was a man of great influence and prestige, he disrupted the household of a man who was actually more powerful than he, and demanded continual obedience from his son-in-law even though his daughter was still in seclusion. Such behavior was only acceptable for a man whose son-in-law had moved in with *him,* not vice versa.

After living in the Kalapalo settlement about two months, it was evident that W. was receiving a number of men in her seclusion chamber at night. Her parents, sleeping on the other side of the seclusion wall, were apparently unconcerned about this, but one night her betrothed heard someone scrambling over the wall. This led to K. chasing and briefly scuffling with the man, something highly uncharacteristic of Kalapalo men (who tend to vent their jealousy on their wives). The young man who was caught was a kinsman of K., the son of S.'s "sister." Because the fight took place outside the house of this man's own future parents-in-law, the incident greatly embarrassed many people.

The next day the Kalalapo left for the Kuikuru village, where they were to participate in a long-planned trading ceremony. N. and his son joined the general party of travelers, leaving S. and W. behind in Aifa. N. was said to be very upset that his daughter was publicly known to have lovers. However, one reason for his going to the Kuikuru village was to bring back to Aifa the large quantity of manioc flour he had left behind. The fact that all the Kalapalo men would help him carry the flour to Aifa would publicly and formally indicate his decision to change his village affiliation.

In the Kuikuru settlement was K.'s first wife, who now seemed anxious to return to Aifa. That night she went to sleep with K. in the house where the visitors had slung their hammocks. One of the Kuikuru who had been angered by the engagement of K. to W. informed N. of this. He (perhaps sensing that this would be an appropriate excuse for breaking off the relationship) surprised the pair with a flashlight and, enraged, declared that the engagement was broken. His excuse was that he did not want his son-in-law to have two wives. If this were so, it would mean that K. would be allied once again to his first wife's brother (and his household), who were living with the Kuikuru. This would, in fact, establish K with a very strong factional group, making him unequivocally a powerful person in the Kalapalo village, and his father-in-law (N.) somewhat subservient. At any rate, the broken engagement satisfied K. completely, since he was not happy with N. as a father-in-law. As the ceremony had ended that same day, next morning the Kalapalo (together with N.) left.

A few days later K. again went to the Kuikuru, returning to Aifa with his wife. As soon as the couple arrived at Aifa, N. and S., together with their children, left unceremoniously for the Kuikuru, thus ending the relationship they had initiated.

At another ceremony held in the Mehinaku settlement the next rainy season, W. left seclusion, her hair being cut by the Mehinaku leader (this ritual is usually performed by a woman's husband, who thus releases her from puberty seclusion at the same time that they become formally married). She was still unmarried, as N. could not decide on another son-in-law. Many individuals, most unrelated to either N. or S., had proposed an engagement, but they had all been refused. Indeed, several of these men had offered to pay bride price for W., though the Kalapalo say a father should not expect this after his daughter has left puberty seclusion.

Finally, in the fall of 1967, a second Kalapalo man successfully asked to marry W. L. was a young man whose sister was married to N.'s single supporting kinsman among the Kuikuru. Another sister of L. was married to the son of S.'s "sister" in Aifa. Furthermore, L.'s elder brother was married to that same sister. L. thus had several types of affinal links to N. and S. L.'s strategy was to visit his sister in the Kuikuru settlement and live with his brother-in-law and N.'s family in order to convince the latter to give W. to him. For several months L. stayed with this household, helping the two senior men during the piqui harvest. He was apparently successful, for he returned with W. to Aifa in November, remaining in the same household as his older brother and brothers-in-law. This time N. and S. remained behind with the Kuikuru. Having publicly insulted K. and his father at the ceremony during which their daughter had been released from seclusion, they could hardly re-establish friendly ties among the Kalapalo.

All seemed to go well with L. and W. and, as an added benefit, with W. and the senior woman of her new household, who was, after all, her mother's "sister." W.'s relationships with the women of this household were thus relaxed and comfortable, even though she was a newly married, in-marrying bride. Therefore, it was a shock to this group when N. returned to Aifa after only a month to take W. back to the Kuikuru. His excuse was that these very women were mistreating his daughter. Highly indignant, they denied this and sought to find who had spread the story. The source was a man from Mïgiyapey whose Kuikuru *ifisuagï* had been a claimant before W. had even entered puberty seclusion. The Mïgiyapey man had acted on his brother's behalf, hoping that a divorce would result in the latter finally being able to marry W.

N. apparently was still adamant about not allowing his daughter to marry a Kuikuru, however. L. insisted on traveling once more to his

former father-in-law, against the advice of his many relatives who by this time were beginning to speak very strongly against N. Once again L. was successful in bringing W. back to Aifa, but only after he had paid N. with shell ornaments. Yet in the end N. was not satisfied, and W. had to return to the Kuikuru. Thus the situation remained when I left the Upper Xingú in 1968. When I returned in 1979, they were married and living with N. and S. in the Kuikuru settlement.

Despite the special appropriateness of marriage between L. and W., owing to the complex affinal relationships between his sibling set and those of both S. and N., the latter were unable to accept this union because it conflicted with their own personal interest in remaining free of both witchcraft accusations and witchcraft performed against them. Threatened with the harm that would come to his daughter if she were permanently married to a man who incurred the jealousy of too many Kuikuru contenders, and fearing for his own life because of the poverty of his relationships with Kuikuru factional alliances, N. could not at the time permit his daughter to marry someone who belonged to a faction that claimed his undivided loyalty. Thus, two years after exiting puberty seclusion, W. was still an unmarried woman.

The second case consists of the marital and engagement history of a young Kalapalo man whose mother was one of A.'s sisters (see Figure 3). His case is interesting because it illustrates the succession of wives and fiancees which a man sometimes goes through until he is able to successfully settle down with one woman. The succession results not from marital instability alone but from the vagaries of epidemics and personal incompatibility between potential spouses. Yet, like the preceding example, the selection of spouses for E. conformed to the strategy

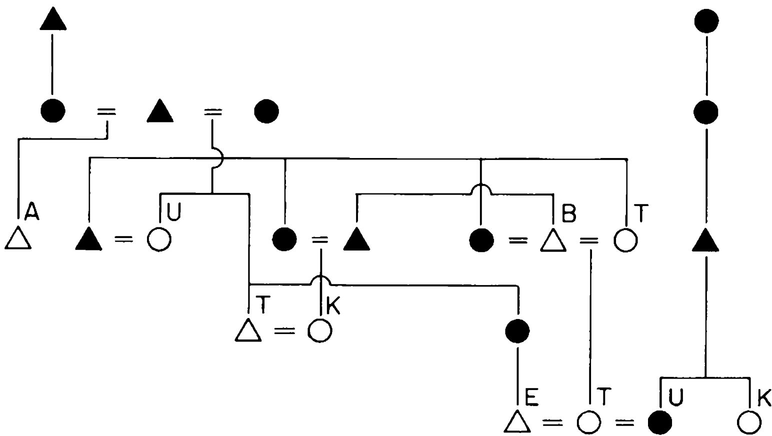

FIGURE 3. SIMPLIFIED GENEALOGICAL RELATIONS IN E.'S CASE.

of maximizing one's relationships with distant kin for the purpose of political alliance and refuge from witchcraft accusations.

The first wife selected for E. was a girl in puberty seclusion, whose father was an *ifisuagï* of A. and E.'s mother. Unfortunately, before they had been married long, this woman died suddenly, allegedly the victim of witchcraft. Therefore, her younger sister, also in puberty seclusion, was selected as E.'s second wife. This woman had refused E.'s seductive advances, however, and so he refused to marry her. On the day of their wedding, when she came to his house to remove his hammock and carry it back to her father's household, he fled out the back door, leaving her crying in the doorway. His mother's *ifisúandaw* had made arrangements for the marriage despite his request to end the alliance. Such a marriage was not only an appropriate *ifándaw* marriage but conformed to the sororate rule. A third engagement was attempted by another *ifisuagï* of E.'s mother who lived with the Yawalipiti. Although it was highly inappropriate to do so, this man suggested directly to E. that he marry a daughter who had been divorced several times by Kuikuru men who accused her of having too many lovers (in fact, E. was one of these). E. rejected this proposal indirectly by suggesting to the older man that the proper person to speak with about it would be his mother. Yet he never told the older woman since he did not like the girl because of her promiscuity, and did not want to live with the Yawalipiti, whose language he did not speak. E.'s mother and her *ifisúandaw* were annoyed that he did not tell them of the request of his *ifau*'s father.

Eventually, the older sibling set engaged E. to the eight-year-old daughter of B., a strong factional leader and Kalapalu *anetu*. Here, again, a complex network of relationships between B. and his wife T., on the one hand, and E.'s mother's *ifisúandaw* on the other justified several times over the exchange of spouses between them. Furthermore, after making the alliance known to E., he would stand in between the rival factions of A. and B., allied to each but able to provide a bridge between them.

In both examples Kalapalo parents' initial selection of spouses for their children followed the rule of "affinability," which defines persons labeled *ifándaw* as potential spouses. In each case the decision was made to choose a distant *ifisuagï*'s child as a spouse for the unmarried person. Thus the initial strategy was to conform to the most explicit norm of mate selection, that referring to the concept of social distance, which defines certain categories of kin as affinable.

However, a more subtle strategy, one which perhaps overrides the original one, also figured in each case. This was a scheme by means of which an alliance for political purposes, motivated by witchcraft accusations, became more critical than the consideration of kinship ties. The need for security against potential public indignation forced the accused

witch (however secure at a particular moment) to seek what can only be described as asylum among a set of powerful affines who might have prevented his execution by outraged members of his own community. In N.'s case a change of residence was made to avoid an immediate threat against him, but more usually, as in E.'s case, a more far-sighted strategy is used to reinforce existing ties that are becoming diffuse through the creation of new factions that draw away support from earlier alliances. Clearly, then, Kalapalo arranged marriages do not only affect the establishment of ties of reciprocity between people who may or may not happen to be related by kinship. They also maintain the delicate balance of power between factional groups that are opposed by the rivalry of their leaders for political power, but that use witchcraft accusations and consensus about who is a witch as an idiom of this opposition. Hence it is important to reinforce ties between socially distant kin and between persons who are non-kin in order to expand one's domain of refuge should one someday need to flee. The most judicious means of reinforcing these ties is through the establishment of affinal alliances.

NOTES

1. This does not mean that the Kalapalo have a positive rule of *ifándaw* marriage, however, since nonrelatives may equally legitimately be married or become lovers.

2. Earlier I indicated that the Kalapalo are unable to explain why some people are affinable and others not. Similarly, when asked to whom they owe "great" *ifutisu,* Kalapalo informants simply list every relative they have, stating that they have "great *ifutisu*" for everyone. To admit that one does not conform to the ideal kinship relationship (*ifutisu*) is to admit that one is not a proper kinsman, and is therefore somewhat less than a model member of one's society. It also suggests that one does not wish to accept one's kinsmen as such. To deny a kinship relationship (or to hedge on it by saying that one's feelings of *ifutisu* are not strong in a particular case) is so serious a breach of the *ifutisu* norm itself as to result in witchcraft accusations against the speaker in question. Such a person is considered motivated by unknown and inexplicable antisocial feelings. It is no wonder that Kalapalo refuse to rank individuals in terms of their *ifutisu* toward one another.