Marriage Practices in Lowland South America

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11

Change in Wachipaeri Marriage Patterns

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Introduction

Studies of the formal aspects of marriage sometimes overlook the fact that this institution is basic to the continuation of any culture. Marriage legitimates, and often requires, childbearing, thus providing the individuals who will bear the culture; it further provides protection and sustenance for these children until they can sustain and protect themselves. In many cases the parents of the child, or the mother(s) and her husband(s), are largely responsible for inculcating much of the knowledge of both nature and culture that a child receives in its early years. Thus any drastic change in marriage practices within a given culture should have drastic repercussions on that culture and might even endanger its continued existence. In this study I shall examine the effects of a devastating epidemic, compounded by growing pressure from European culture, on Wachipaeri marriage patterns. I shall indicate how these changes, especially as they affect the role of women, place Wachipaeri culture in severe danger of extinction.[1]

General Background

The group now called Wachipaeri is the remnant of a number of closely related bands who formerly occupied most of the valleys of Q'osñipata in the Department of Cuzco, Province of Paucartambo, District of Cosñipata, in eastern Peru. The area comprises five major river valleys, the lower reaches of which are separated only by low hills. These rivers (Q'eros, Cosñipata, Pilcopata, Tono, and Piñi-piñi) join just above the Pongo de Coñec, which is the head of navigation of the Alto Madre de

Dios River. The Wachipaeri belong to an isolated linguistic family that I have called Háte, which contains several mutually intelligible dialects (Lyon 1975). The groups belonging to this family once occupied much of the Alto Madre de Dios drainage, but many no longer exist (Lyon 1975, in press). To the west of the Wachipaeri are the Machiguenga, an Arawak-speaking people who differ in both culture and language from the Wachipaeri. Although the Machiguenga once occupied the northwestern portion of the valleys, they, like the Wachipaeri, have now been forced back to the margins of the region.

The Wachipaeri are also in contact with the Quechua-speaking highland Indians, and have oral traditions of such contact prior to the European conquest. The Spanish appropriated Inca coca plantations in the valleys shortly after their invasion, and since that time the Wachipaeri have been in more or less continuous contact with the land owners and laborers in the region, who are generally Spanish-speaking or bilingual in Spanish and Quechua (Lyon in press). In spite of the long contact, the Wachipaeri have been highly resistant to outside influence, clinging stubbornly to their culture in the face of various attempts either to wipe them out or convert them. Since 1948, however, they have had to face great pressure with very few people to carry on the culture; at that time the group was reduced from about 200 to about 70 individuals by a smallpox epidemic.[2]

Traditional Patterns

Prior to this disaster, the choice of a marriage partner was largely in the hands of the man, and he had a wide selection of prospective mates. Marriage was permissible between Wachipaeri "not of the same family," and with non-Wachipaeri of groups who were not classified as "enemy." Although cross-cousin marriage was said to be preferred, I found no cases of such matches (see, however, Appendix I).[3] Opportunities to meet prospective spouses were provided by extensive visiting throughout the valleys and by drinking parties. Drinking parties were held for various reasons by one or another house in the valleys about once a month, and all Wachipaeri in the valleys were invited (Lyon 1967: 38-41).

A number of Machiguenga women were incorporated into the Wachipaeri groups as wives. Some had been captured in raids and others seem to have been acquired by more pacific means. I heard of no case of a Machiguenga man marrying a Wachipaeri woman and living with the Wachipaeri. There were, however, two groups of Háte speakers, the Toyeri and the Sirineri, some of whose men married Wachipaeri women and settled among the Wachipaeri. I have no evidence that this arrange-

ment was reciprocal. Both of these groups were located downriver from the Wachipaeri, but it is unclear exactly how many specific culturally defined groups were involved.

Once a man decided which woman he wanted to marry, he approached her parents for permission. If they consented, the pair was married, even over the woman's objections. Both parents were involved in the decision, and they apparently seldom consented to a marriage if their daughter was vehemently opposed, or if they thought she would be unhappy. If an unmarried man and woman were found to be having a sexual affair, however, they were forced to marry each other.

There is no indication that any Wachipaeri woman remained single throughout her lifetime. Some men did, however, and I knew one bachelor about 70 years old. I was told that a man might meet an animal spirit in the forest who would appear to him in the form of a woman. If the man established a sexual relationship with such a spirit woman, he would never marry. I do not know if this was the only reason given for men remaining single, nor if all single men were believed to have established such a relationship.

Although the Wachipaeri are officially monogamous today, they have practiced polygyny within the last two generations. The extent of the polygyny is not clear, nor is the reason for its abandonment, although a shortage of women may have been a major factor.[4]

The Wachipaeri lived in large communal houses separated from one another by a walk of one-half to two hours, and occupied by a numerous extended family plus occasional unrelated hangers-on. Residence after marriage depended on various factors. In the case of cross-cousin marriage, since both parties would originally be living in the same house, there was no change of residence. In the case of marriage between houses patrilocality was preferred unless the husband came from far away, for example, from another group such as the Toyeri or Sirineri, in which case he would move into his wife's house. The critical distance may have been that distance beyond which regular contact could no longer be maintained. Wherever residence was established, the newly married couple became part of a large interacting household that could exert a certain amount of influence in the case of difficulties arising between man and wife. They were in a position to both observe and be helped by older, established married people who served as examples and could be approached for advice on how to avoid the many pitfalls present in a new marriage.

If a woman found her married life unhappy, she might run away. In such a case her father was expected to help apprehend her and return her to her husband. On the other hand, her husband was expected to keep her happy so that she would not run away. Women frequently appealed to

their brothers for help, and might even visit them for extended periods in case of trouble.

Among the songs sung at drinking parties are a number sung by women complaining about marital problems. Since such songs were sung before the assembled company, the listeners were in a position to help resolve such problems once they were out in the open. Help might take the form of advice to the complainant and/or the object of her complaint. This advice was frequently couched in song, since direct criticism in any other form was not permitted (Lyon 1967).

If all efforts to make a marriage function failed, divorce was possible. Indeed, it appears that Wachipaeri marriages were quite brittle, and many individuals passed through several before settling down for life. On the other hand, I found most older Wachipaeri couples to be affectionate toward each other and to maintain a happy and egalitarian relationship. There appears to have been little bad feeling between divorced spouses, and the decision regarding disposition of children was made by mutual consent. When one marriage partner died, the survivor was not required to remarry, but remarriage with a sibling of the deceased spouse was common. If the survivor remained single, he or she would be aided when necessary by grown children and/or other close relatives.

Causes of Change

Virtually all the practices outlined above have changed, most of them quite recently. Probably the single most important factor in the changes was the sudden sharp drop in population as a result of the 1948 smallpox epidemic. At about the same time there was an increase in the presence of outsiders in the valleys attracted by the road that was being constructed into the region.[5]

In about 1946 a North American Baptist mission was established on Wachipaeri territory. In 1955 a Dominican mission was established on the Alto Madre de Dios below the head of navigation, and in 1958 was moved to its present location at Shintuya (Secretariado de Misiones Dominicanas n.d.:74). Each of these factors has influenced Wachipaeri marriage practices.

Present Situation

The Wachipaeri have traditionally been divided into two major groupings, one in the southeast part of the valleys and one farther north. During my studies the southeastern group (25 people in 1965) was gathered on the Baptist mission lands, which occupied the territory of three Wachi-

paeri houses. The northern group was scattered in from three to five small clusters. Although I visited one of the northern settlements briefly, my data were obtained almost entirely from the southeastern group.

In 1955 I gathered, from informants, a count of all known living Wachipaeri. The total was 71, 60 of whom were living in the valleys of Q'osñipata.[6] I do not have exact ages for these individuals, but they can be divided roughly in two groups, those below the age of about 10 years and those above.[7] The breakdown by sex is as follows:

	Over 10 years old		*Under 10 years old*	
	women	21	girls	4
	men	27	boys	8
Totals		48		12

At that time there were three Wachipaeri men and one woman living at the Catholic mission.

The population drop alone was sufficient to cause a number of problems in maintaining Wachipaeri culture, but to complicate matters further, there was a definite shortage of women. The figures presented do not tell the entire tale. Of the 21 women in the valleys, 4 were living with non-Wachipaeri. Thus, of a total of 48 individuals over 10 years old, there were 10 males with no immediate possibility of marriage, or a ratio of approximately 1.5 men for each woman. The sex ratio of 2 to 1 among children under 10 did not bode well for the future. I know of no reason why the epidemic should have affected women more than men, and there is no way to determine the population structure prior to the epidemic. I have, however, no data indicating a shortage of women prior to that time.

Besides the reduced number of women, chances to meet them were also reduced. Since the last drinking party to encompass the whole region was held in 1955, there no longer were opportunities for all Wachipaeri to gather. The discontinuance of the all-inclusive drinking parties seems to have resulted from the effect of the Baptist missionaries on the southeastern group; their culture was greatly affected by the missionaries following the epidemic. Although the missionized Wachipaeri could, and did, attend parties given on the other side of the valleys, they could not reciprocate. I was told that the northern groups continued to have occasional drinking parties but no longer invited the Wachipaeri living on the mission. Although the Baptist missionaries had little effect prior to the epidemic, their later efforts were particularly noticeable among the many children who were orphaned, some of whom had no surviving close relatives (see Appendix II). By 1964 all Wachipaeri living on mission

land appeared to be converted, and one result was that the converts no longer established contact with animal spirits. None of the young unmarried men had ever had such contact, thus removing at least one culturally approved reason for remaining unmarried.

Informal visiting among the various Wachipaeri groups has gradually declined; I noted a great difference between 1954 and 1960. While the reasons for this decline are not obvious, one important factor is probably the increased number of outsiders in the region. At the same time that the two divisions of the Wachipaeri have been gradually pushed out to the margins of the habitable region, the intervening region has been occupied by outsiders; thus any Wachipaeri wishing to visit another group would have to pass through a number of properties owned by outsiders. Such passage may be not only distasteful but actually dangerous, since many land owners assume the right to order any Wachipaeri to work for them, running errands or performing other tasks, generally without pay. Failure to accede to such "requests" might result in very unpleasant consequences. The role of the missionaries in the decline in visiting is not entirely clear. The personnel of the Baptist mission changed from time to time with concomitant differences in attitude. Sometimes visiting between the converted and "heathen" Wachipaeri was discouraged, while at others there was no objection. Some contact was maintained between the Wachipaeri of the valleys and those of the Catholic mission; however, the distance is sufficient that such visits have never been frequent and the Catholic missionaries have never encouraged them.

If a young Wachipaeri man had problems finding a Wachipaeri wife, the situation was no better outside his group. The number of Machiguenga in the valleys had also declined, and the Háte-speaking groups who had previously intermarried with the Wachipaeri were, as noted, virtually extinct. One young Wachipaeri from the southeastern group secured a young Amarakaeri wife from the Catholic mission at Shintuya and returned with her to the valleys. The Amarakaeri are one of several Háte-speaking groups represented at the Shintuya mission who were previously either enemies of the Wachipaeri or unknown to them. This particular marriage caused the missionaries to institute very careful watch over the remaining young women, not permitting them to marry off the mission. Thus, to get a wife from this source, a Wachipaeri man would have to settle there, and many feel the cost too high.

What, then, are the possible solutions available to the unmarried Wachipaeri man? In the face of similar sex imbalance, other groups have resorted to some sort of polyandrous arrangement (e.g. Laraia 1963, Clastres 1970:19-25). I observed one Wachipaeri household composed of two men and one woman in 1955, and another such flourished at

least from 1965 to 1968. The proximity of the missions, as well as many Christian settlers, tends to militate against such arrangements as a general solution. Were polyandrous households to become common, outsiders would surely learn of them and could exert strong social and economic pressures against persons involved in such un-Christian groupings. I knew of a single case of two young men who seemed to have established a homosexual relationship. While this solution might relieve the sexual tensions of the pair involved, it would not contribute to the Wachipaeri birthrate. Another young man tried to steal his uncle's wife. Not only was this move unsuccessful, but it almost led to the dissolution of the entire community through the tensions aroused.

There was some talk of trying to get together with some of the smaller independent remnants of downriver groups, but nothing positive was done. There is also no assurance that such groups would either have surplus women or welcome the idea of such a coalition. The other possible source of women is among the Quechua-speaking highland Indians, especially those now living in the valleys. One young Wachipaeri whom I asked about the possibility of marrying a highland woman replied that it would not work. He noted that highland women do not know how to cultivate lowland crops, how to prepare the food, or how to do all the other things that a Wachipaeri woman must do to keep the family economy going, entirely aside from the language difficulty.[8] There is also the question of how willing such a woman would be to marry a Wachipaeri. On the Peruvian social scale the highland Indian is generally considered at the bottom, but the tropical forest Indian is even lower.

The problems raised by the young man were real ones. The man who had tried to steal his uncle's wife left the valleys and lived in Cuzco for a couple of years. During that time he married a highland woman and returned with her to live with the Wachipaeri. The arrangement did not last, however, and no offspring resulted.

If a young man succeeds in finding a Wachipaeri wife, further problems may arise. If she runs away, who will bring her back? Her father probably died in the epidemic. Furthermore, she may take shelter with the outsiders. An attractive young woman seldom has trouble in finding someone to take her in, especially in a frontier situation with a shortage of women in the general population. As a direct result of the woman shortage, there is an increasing likelihood that a man may try to steal another man's wife, and such actions are very disruptive of the social fabric. The probability that a new wife will run away may be greater now that there are fewer opportunities for problem resolution open to women. Without drinking parties, a woman has no acceptable forum for expressing her problems and seeking advice. Since the epidemic few have brothers

to visit until problems can be resolved. The few communal-type houses that still exist often contain no more than a nuclear family and one or two additional people, so that the large supporting group that used to help newly married couples with their problems is no longer available. In fact, in about 1961 the southeastern group abandoned their communal houses and joined together in a settlement of nuclear family dwellings around a central plaza in imitation of the white pattern.[9]

Although widowed women have no problem finding a spouse today, a man who is widowed or abandoned by his wife is unlikely to be able to remarry. Such a man will not starve; even if he does not cultivate his own fields, his fellow Wachipaeri will feed him. If, however, his wife has either died or gone to live with the outsiders, he will probably be left to care for his children. Although other members of the community will aid in taking care of such children, they will not constitute the close family group that would have been present in pre-epidemic days (see Appendix II).

Conclusions and Some Questions

The basic problem is the continuing survival of Wachipaeri culture. The survival of the culture demands both the continuance of those cultural practices that mark the Wachipaeri off as a unit from the outsiders who surround them, and a population to carry on these cultural practices. The Wachipaeri have a long history of resistance to outside influence. Such resistance is obvious in the minimal amount of either indigenous highland Peruvian or European cultural influence observable in their culture in 1954, and the fact that most such influences were material objects (steel tools, chickens, the use of Western clothing in the presence of outsiders) and some use of Spanish by young men. Now, however, the Wachipaeri are under growing pressure to change, and there are ever fewer of them to resist such pressure. In view of the foregoing account of recent changes, one might ask what remains of the culture. And does anyone care whether it survives or not? The question of what will persist is one that will require time to answer, since at the moment the entire culture is in a state of flux. It is clear that what will emerge will be different from what has gone before, but the exact form it will take remains to be seen. The question of whether anyone cares can be answered with a resounding Yes. The Wachipaeri care. They feel themselves to be a distinctive people, standing in sharp contrast to outsiders. They are aware, and their awareness is expressed especially in their songs, that their way of life and their uniqueness are in danger. This awareness is more obvious among the older people, but the younger ones also feel

the pressure to change from the outside; although they are willing to change in some respects, they do not feel themselves at one with those to whom they always refer as "the people from outside."

Although I have no quantitative data, my impression is that the Wachipaeri population has grown somewhat since 1955. There is no apparent drop in birthrate, and more children are surviving owing to the recent availability of medical care, especially through the missions. Thus the population can probably survive as a biological unit. The main question, then, is whether the culture can hold together long enough for the children being born today to grow up as Wachipaeri rather than as cholofied Peruvians. Obviously Wachipaeri culture must change, and it is changing, but the problem of maintaining *a* Wachipaeri culture will be more severe if Wachipaeri men must seek wives from outside the group. Women are important in the transmission of Wachipaeri culture. They are responsible for most plant lore and much in the way of oral tradition, among other things. The influence of the many Machiguenga women who married into the group may be seen in the considerable number of people bilingual in Wachipaeri and Machiguenga as well as in the many Machiguenga loan words in the language. The introduction of highland women, probably bilingual in Quechua and Spanish, combined with the fact that most men who would marry such women would be bilingual in Spanish and Wachipaeri, could lead to the abandonment of Wachipaeri as a language in favor of Spanish, a tendency that would be reinforced by the presence of the ever-encroaching settlers.

At the moment the breakdown of a series of traditional institutions tends toward the removal of Wachipaeri women from the marriage pool. The lack of surviving parents, combined with the shortage of women, has shifted the decision on a marriage partner from the men to the women. Women may now choose freely among the various suitors available to them, and may even prefer to marry out of the group. Superficially, life among the outsiders may seem very appealing to a young Wachipaeri woman, surrounded as it is by the glamor of the unknown. Not until she is involved in such an arrangement does she realize that she does not have the freedom to leave if she is unhappy that she would have had among her own people, nor does modern Peruvian culture include any expectation that a man should do his best to keep his wife happy so she will not want to run away (see Appendix I). Even those women who initially choose to marry within their own culture may end outside of it. Since running away from an unhappy marital situation has always been culturally acceptable for women, it will probably continue. Now, however, the options have changed. A woman may have no brothers or parents to run to, but she may seek refuge with either a settler or the Catholic mission (see, for example, Appendix II).

Some of the problems I have discussed will presumably be resolved in time. It is only the generation immediately following the epidemic that suffers so from the lack of family, and all the problems relating to that particular factor may be resolved in a maximum of two generations. On the other hand, will the families that are formed now function in the same way families have functioned in the past, especially in the solution of marital problems? At the moment the question of the survival of Wachipaeri culture hinges on the decisions made by Wachipaeri women. And the decisions reached by these women will not simply provide a change in formal aspects of social organization but, rather, will be the key to the continuation or extinction of an entire culture.[10]

NOTES

1. The fieldwork upon which this study is based encompassed some 20 months in 1954-55, 1960, 1962, 1964, 1965, and 1968. Support for this work was provided variously by the American Museum of Natural History; the Graduate Division of the University of California, Berkeley; the National Institutes of Health (National Institute of General Medical Sciences), training Grant no. GM-1224; and the Johnson Fund of the American Philosophical Society. Unless otherwise noted all statements are based on field data.

2. Population data for the period prior to the epidemic are based on informant statements, specifically on the number of houses with a modest estimate of 25-30 people per house. This latter figure is based on counts of the number of people recorded as living in the houses of informants. The population was probably considerably larger around the turn of the century when my oldest informant was a boy. A conservative estimate for that time would be 500-700 people.

3. The Wachipaeri are uncomfortable discussing close kin who are dead and have stringent prohibitions against mentioning the names of the dead. Since, at the time I gathered these data, virtually no one had a complete family, and many had only a single living relative, it was impossible to collect genealogies. The same prohibitions prevented close inquiry into the traditional social organization, which had broken down almost entirely by that time.

4. Johnston et al. (1969) note a similar shortage of women among the younger Peruvian Cashinahua. It will be interesting to see if this sexual imbalance affects their practice of polygyny.

5. The influx of settlers and exploiters preceded the completion of the road, which was finally opened as far as the head of navigation only in 1960. The source of the epidemic was not the settlers themselves but the young daughter of a mule driver who trafficked with the inhabitants of the valley, exchanging provisions for cane alcohol.

6. Aside from four individuals at the Catholic mission, the other Wachipaeri outside the valleys were too far away to maintain any contact (e.g. Lima and Puerto Maldonado) and are therefore irrelevant to the present discussion.

7. The breakoff point of 10 years is insignificant culturally, since Wachipaeri marry relatively late, between 18 and 25 for both men and women.

8. Most highland Indians in the valleys are somewhat bilingual in Spanish and Quechua, but the women know less Spanish than do the men. Few Wachipaeri speak more than a few words of Quechua, although most of the young men are relatively fluent in Spanish and frequently Machiguenga.

9. The reasons for this change in settlement pattern are complex and not directly germane to this paper.

10. I am indebted to Alex Georgiadis and John H. Rowe, both of whom read the original version of this work and offered many valuable suggestions. They are not, however, responsible for any of its shortcomings, which are mine.

Appendix I: Pilar

When I met Pilar in 1955, she was about 45 years old. Although Wachipaeri, she was living with a Greek hacienda administrator and had been doing so for some 20 years. They had four living children, three girls and a boy. She told me the following story of how she came to settle down with this man.

As a girl she had lived in a communal house among her people. Living in the same house was her mother's brother's son, Salomón, whom she was expected to wed. When she was about 19, the families began to exert some pressure for the marriage to take place. Salomón, however, was in love with a tall, handsome Machiguenga girl, Irma, and did not want to marry Pilar. Since Pilar and Salomón were good friends, they discussed this problem and devised a solution. One night they met Irma and her brother, Carlos, and all four fled downriver, out of the territory of their family groups.

For a couple of years the four lived happily together, and then Carlos died. Pilar finally took refuge on the hacienda of the Greek, who was living nearby. Later Salomón and Irma returned to the Q'osñipata valleys, where they still dwelt in 1954. In time Pilar and the Greek also moved to the valleys.

In 1960 Pilar's children were exerting pressure on their parents to get married so that the children could be legitimized, and they requested that I try to convince their mother. I had assumed that their father opposed the marriage but found I was wrong. Pilar told me that she would have left the Greek any number of times to return to her people, but stayed because of the children. She had, in fact, run away from him twice, but he had pursued her and brought her back. Now she was waiting for the children to become independent in order to leave him for good. Under no circumstances would she be legally tied to this man with whom she had lived for 25 years but who was still an outsider to her.

Appendix II: Manuel

I first knew Manuel in 1954 when he was about 18 years old. He was one of the many young Wachipaeri orphaned by the epidemic. His only surviving

kin were a half-brother and an aunt who was raising them. A number of such children were then living on the Baptist mission, more influenced by the missionaries than by any other factor in their surroundings. Manuel, in particular, had been acting as linguistic informant for the missionary, since he spoke a little Spanish. Through his close association with the mission, Manuel developed not only a taste for trade goods but also the idea that cash money was easily obtained. For example, the missionaries paid ten centavos per bug to the children for catching cockroaches. Although Manuel was considered to be rather lazy, he was paid ten *soles* a day to work as an informant at a time when the average daily wage for agricultural labor was two and a half *soles*. The missionaries also allowed the Wachipaeri under their tutelage to buy trade goods and canned food on credit, using the same debt bondage system that was current among the local haciendas. At one time Manuel was said to owe the mission several hundred *soles* (with an exchange of about 19 to the dollar).

I again encountered Manuel in 1960. By then his aunt had died and he had married and had two sons, but I never met his wife.

In 1964 Manuel was still living on the Baptist mission lands, but his wife had left him and he had taken his older son, Jorge, to the Catholic mission for schooling. He lived with his younger son, Juan, in a house he had never quite finished building (it had only two and a half walls). He had planted some coffee that he neglected, with a resultant poor yield. He had not planted a subsistence plot, although the other single men in the community had done so. He occasionally went hunting but seldom with any success, since he usually did not get up early enough to take advantage of the early morning hours when hunting was best. Manuel and Juan ate with the other families in the settlement in a sort of rotation. They would eat with one family until they got tired of the fare, or until the family had no meat for several days, and then move on to eat with another family. So they survived. No one complained of this freeloading, but the group often joked that Manuel was the laziest man alive. Juan wandered around with his father and was occasionally left in the care of his maternal aunt, who also lived in the settlement. I inquired about what had happened to Manuel's wife and was told that she had left him and gone to live with one of the outsiders. She had been, I was told, a fine, hard-working, pleasant woman. He, however, had beaten her so often and so severely that she finally could not stand it and had left him.

Manuel could not understand that one did not receive something for nothing. When he visited Jorge at the Catholic mission, he complained that the padres wanted him to work for them while he was there. He could see no reason why he should pay either for his son's schooling or for the food he himself ate during his visits. Although Jorge was a fine lad, Juan, who was living with Manuel, showed every sign of following in his father's footsteps, which had been directed so much earlier by the benevolent Baptist missionaries.