

Between Tradition and Evangelisation: Marriage Ritualisation on Colonial and Contemporary Bioko Island

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ABSTRACT: The start of the 20th century on Bioko Island (Equatorial Guinea) coincides with the expansion of Spanish colonisation. Around 1910, the intense process of “Hispanicisation” began, totally disrupting native Bubi society. The colonial government, together with the intense evangelisation carried out on the island by the Catholic Church, weakened and modified Bubi power structures. Colonialism also provoked important changes in Bubi family structure and the evangelising mission was, fundamentally, directed toward controlling and transforming marriage practices. This text analyses how the loss of the political function of the Bubi chieftainships affected marriage practices and examines the other variables that influenced these changes and their effects on the present-day situation of Bubi women. Finally, the text explains how the practices and values that the evangelisation managed to introduce influenced the construction of Bubi ethnic identity.

KEYWORDS: Equatorial Guinea; Bubis; Colonisation-evangelisation; Identity; Marriage and ritual kinship links; Spirit-husband.

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RESUMEN: *Entre la tradición y la evangelización: ritualización del matrimonio en la Isla Bioko colonial y contemporánea.* - El inicio del siglo XX en la isla de Bioko (Guinea Ecuatorial) coincide con la expansión de la colonización española. En torno a 1910 comenzó el proceso intenso de “hispanización” el cual, trastocó la sociedad bubi de forma rotunda. El Gobierno colonial, junto a la intensa evangelización que llevó a cabo la Iglesia Católica en la isla, fueron debilitando y modificando las estructuras de poder bubi. El colonialismo también provocó importantes cambios en la estructura familiar bubi, la misión evangelizadora, en concreto, estuvo encaminada, fundamentalmente, a controlar y transformar las prácticas matrimoniales. En el texto se analiza cómo la pérdida de la función política de las jefaturas bubis repercutió en las prácticas matrimoniales, qué otras variables influyeron en estos cambios y cómo ha repercutido todo ello en la situación actual de la mujer bubi. Finalmente, abordo cómo la evangelización logró implantar unas prácticas y valores que influyeron en los procesos de identificación-diferenciación en la construcción de la identidad bubi.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Guinea Ecuatorial; Colonización-evangelización; Identidad; Matrimonio y vínculos de parentesco ritual; Esposo-espíritu.

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HISTORICAL CONVERGENCES AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

The Bubi are the autochthonous ethnic group on Bioko Island, though their origin is uncertain and the date of their arrival on the island cannot be pinpointed.¹ We know only that the island was populated by different migrations from the continent of groups displaced by other Bantu peoples advancing towards the coast. In the 18th century, the Bubi began to conduct commercial transactions with African and European foreigners. The first Europeans to settle on the island were the English, who founded the city of Clarence (today Malabo) in 1827. The Spanish government sent its first expeditions to the island in the 1840s. A decade later Spain started colonisation. From the mid-19th century onwards, Spain faced major difficulties administering its colonial possessions deriving to a great extent from ignorance of the territories. The colonisation process was characterised by precarious political and administrative organisation and the autochthonous political scene in Bioko was marked by certain groups struggling for supremacy over others in the different regions of the island, and by the migratory movements that resulted from these struggles.

At the end of the 19th century, a political process that was transcendental for Bubi society took place in Bioko Island. In only a few years, there was a changeover in the native political structure, moving from decentralised government in headquarters dotted around the island to a centralised headquarters (to a consolidated chieftainship) that culminated in the emergence of a kingdom (the Bagitari dynasty).² The reinforcement of this political power provoked a hierarchical stratification of Bubi society, especially in the southern villages, with Moka Valley as its political and religious centre, where both headquarters were located. This hierarchical structuring made it necessary to maintain strategic marriage alliances. This process coincided with the incipient advance of Spanish colonial rule on Bioko Island.³

Bubi political autonomy and resistance to colonial government ended during the very reign that had years earlier managed to centralise power, when the monarch named Moka died in 1899. At the turn of the century, Claretian missionaries began to contact King Malabo, the succeeding monarch, whose political power was weaker and who presented no resistance, and the mission finally managed to establish itself in Moka Valley.⁴

Throughout the 20th century, the political scenario changed radically. Colonialism weakened and modified Bubi power structures. Around 1910, the process of “Hispanicisation” began. The colonial administration consolidated its power thanks to the decisive role of the Catholic mission and its evangelisation policy for introducing the ideas and values of Catholicism. The colonial government regrouped the Bubi population in villages around the missions that were being built. This concentration made it easier to control the population and made for a more effective evangelisation. This process of regrouping the hamlets totally disrupted Bubi society: it forced

the Bubi to restructure their chieftainships – other “colonial chiefs” who had been educated by the missions were even named – and provoked significant changes in the forms of settlement and in family structure. An important objective of the evangelising mission, in its efforts to transform Bubi society, was to control marriage practices and try to introduce monogamous Christian marriage. There was an incentive for young people to marry canonically: they were assigned a plot of land for their use and an amount of money labelled a “marriage loan” (Salvador, 1944, p. 4). The Board of Indigenous Peoples raised the money by means of a tax that men had to pay for their third and any succeeding wives, simultaneously penalising polygamy.

There is no doubt that colonial practices and the intense evangelisation carried out on Bioko had major consequences, but the transformation of the traditional structures was not exclusively due to colonial agency; endogenous factors such as the local historical development described both before and after the “colonial encounter” also had an influence. I shall explain the evolution marriage practices have undergone using this approach of the confluence of two agencies. Following Gledhill’s idea, I have tried to show the leading role of Bubi agency in Bioko’s colonial history because attributing all the changes to colonial domination “would mean denying, to some extent, the role the native had in colonial history” (Gledhill, 2000, p. 113).

Based on the kinds of marriage that exist in present-day Equatorial Guinean society, the case study that I present refers, specifically, to Bubi marriage practices. I will focus on southern Bioko and the ritualisation of a marriage alliance between a woman and a spirit. This particular marriage alliance has been studied in the framework of “fictitious kinship” (González-Echevaría, 2010) and was first described by Evans-Pritchard (1951, pp. 109-110) among the Nuer of Sudan as “ghost marriage.” What this extreme and paradoxical form of marriage emphasises is the vital importance of making the offspring legitimate and of the difference between legal father and genitor (Laburthe-Tolra and Warnier, 1998). According to Pierre Bonte and Michael Izard (1997, pp. 294–295), most societies establish some kind of distinction between genealogical, social, and legal ties. In the ethnographic case that I present here, there is a dissociation between legal paternity in the figure of the spirit and the biological paternity of the genitor, similar to the “procreative assistant” in the case of ghost marriage (according to González-Echevaría 2010).

This case explicitly illustrates an old anthropological premise about how links of descent for making certain social ties legitimate can be created independently of blood relationships; that is, it underlines the social and cultural character of descent and of kinship relations. The nature of these ties and of the procedures that create pseudo-parental descent ties has been a central issue in the anthropological debate (Barnes, 1974; Fortes, 1969; Scheffler, 1974; Schneider, 1984). This debate is framed by the crisis that the anthropology of kinship, in particular, under-

METHODOLOGY

This text has been prepared using information obtained throughout the extensive monographic fieldwork that I have carried out on Bioko.⁶ The ethnographic material gathered in different periods throughout this 30-year research period, together with the historical documentation from the early 20th century that I have studied, has given me a diachronic perspective from which to analyse the processes of social change that have taken place from the colonial period to the present. This study covers an 80-year time period, from the 1930s to the present.⁷ In addition, the comparative focus of the research (northern and southern parts of the island) has allowed me to establish the diversity and heterogeneity of practices within Bubi social organisation.

As for the information gathered for studying marriage, I would like to highlight the direct testimony obtained from the only four women married according to the traditional rites practiced before the arrival of the missionaries.⁸ Regarding marriage today, specifically, marriage that links a woman to a spirit-husband, I would also like to highlight the double record entered into the genealogies that I created, taking in blood relatives and relatives by marriage, as well as ritual relatives (linked through the spirit-husband). Overlapping the two dimensions of kinship ties is the only way to make the distinction between the biological father (spouse) and the legal father (spirit). Finally, regarding the serial monogamy pattern analysed, I gathered very complete information at one of the locations studied by creating genealogies for the entire population, recording the successive marriages of each individual.⁹

All of this ethnographic material is a significant contribution both because of the extended period that it covers, with information from early dates, and because of the testimony gathered, given the near inexistence of colonial accounts that give a voice to the native population. I should point out that there is hardly any documentation, either colonial or later, on Bubi kinship or on marriage or social organisation, and research is even scarcer. This is why I believe that both the ethnographic material and the analysis of my research contribute to covering this gap and provide one of the few anthropological references on the Bubi ethnic group.¹⁰

As for colonial documentation,¹¹ a single work that provides information on Bubi marriage stands out, the work by the Claretian missionary Aymemí [1894] (1942). There is no doubt that this is the earliest and best source for many aspects of Bubi society at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.¹² There are two other works by Baumann (1888) and Tessmann (1923), but they hardly offer any information on social relations. In the 1960s, another Claretian missionary, A. Martín de Molino (1989), wrote an extensive monograph that focused on the Bubi religion and ancestor cult, but a large part of the information he provides about social organisation, kinship, etc., comes from references to his predecessor, Aymemí.¹³

EVOLUTION OF BUBI MARRIAGE PRACTICES

There are three kinds of marriage in Equatorial Guinea: civil marriage (regulated by the civil code), religious or canonical marriage (regulated by Catholic Canon law), and common-law marriage (regulated by the customs of each of the ethnic groups to which the spouses belong). Common-law marriage, colloquially termed *de país* marriage, is the most common among the Guinean population in general and also among the Bubis. These different kinds of marriage are not mutually exclusive and when couples marry using more than one form, they do not do so simultaneously but over the years the couple lives together. “In Equatorial Guinea, young people take advantage of their fertile years, starting to have children when they are very young, and it is not until they are older that many of them consolidate their relationship by means of one of the different forms of marriage” (Aixelà-Cabré, 2009, p. 2). In this sense, children are born independently of whether a contractual marriage relationship has been formalised or not. Young couples may live as “common-law partners” or each with their respective families, but all offspring are legitimate and are always acknowledged by one or both parents. The notion of an “illegitimate child” does not exist. Therefore, for the majority of the population of Equatorial Guinea, marriage signifies the consolidation of the couple and is a social celebration. But more than procreation, its purpose is to unite families and wider groupings such as clans and to regulate the belonging of the couple’s descendants to those families or clans. Ultimately, marriage (in any of its forms) regulates who provides this legitimacy, that is, to which group (paternal, maternal, or both) the offspring belong. But meaningful differences exist between the ethnic groups and their respective kinship systems. It is important to specify how each ethnic group regulates this according to whether or not people marry and which kind of marriage takes place.

In this regard, in southern Bioko *de país* marriage is understood more as a “free union” (cohabitation) because, although legal in the state’s juridical framework, another kind of marriage exists – *mododo* – which is considered to be a traditional Bubi legal union.

I will first focus on these two types of customary marriage – *de país* and *mododo* – in southern Bioko in order to compare them to the kinds of marriage practised in the past (*rivala re rijole* and *rivala re eoto*) and explain the evolution these practices have undergone.

BUBI COMMON-LAW MARRIAGE “DE PAÍS”

Given that *de país* marriage is regulated “according to the customs of each ethnic group,” the ethnic groups’ interpretations of this kind of marriage have different consequences. Bubi spouses married in the *de país* modality are both legal parents of their offspring and it is not necessary to obtain the consent of the older relatives of the couple. For the Bubi ethnic group as well as among the Ambö (Annobon Island), “bridewealth” does not have the same meaning or as it does for the rest of the ethnic

BUBI MARRIAGES		
	OLD-TIME MARRIAGES	PRESENT-DAY MARRIAGES
"Common-law" Marriage	"Rivala re rijole"	"Estilo del pais"
"Traditional" Marriage	"Rivala re eoto"	"Mododo"

FIGURE 2. Bubi marriages now and then.

groups of Equatorial Guinea because it does not legitimise legal paternity or maternity. In fact, it is symbolic or non-existent and, at any rate, is part of the gifts and attentions the spouses give to one another; returning it is not indispensable to getting a divorce. However, for the Fang, Ndowe, and Bissió ethnic groups, marriage and bride-wealth are nearly equivalent because it is through bride-wealth that legal paternity of children is acquired and it must be returned in the case of divorce.¹⁴

MODODO: TRADITIONAL BUBI LEGAL MARRIAGES IN SOUTHERN BOKO

In the southern villages of the island, women practice the two kinds of marriage simultaneously, *de país* marriage and the marriage that is commonly termed *mododo*,¹⁵ an alliance of the woman with a spirit. This spirit-husband is called the *mochuku* (chief)¹⁶ and is the one who gives legitimacy and affiliation to a descent group to the children that the woman has with any man. This *mochuku* is the legal father, in place of the genitor himself.

In order to understand the reason for practicing this alliance with a spirit and the reason why only the women of a specific area of the island practice it and its implications, it is necessary to know the precedents for these practices and their historical context. Present-day *de país* and *mododo* marriages are related, respectively, to two kinds of marriage practiced in the past, *rivala re rijole* and *rivala re eoto*.

RIVALA RE RIJOLE (OLD-TIME COMMON-LAW MARRIAGE)

Rivala means union, marriage, and *rijole* means love. This was a free union with the consent of the parents and, even though it was socially approved, it was not legally acknowledged. This way of forming a couple (or cohabitation) was practiced by people who did not have sufficient status or means to make a legal marriage, that is, the majority of the population and also widows (who had been legally married), divorced women, and women who had been repudiated (usually for adultery). The main similarity with common-law *de país* Bubi marriage today is the ease with which the union can be dissolved; but the

difference between the two is the legal acknowledgement of *de país* marriage. This confirms that earlier, only those who had a certain status managed to make their unions legal, precisely in order to transmit this status.

RIVALA RE EOTO (OLD-TIME LEGAL MARRIAGE)

Social and political hierarchisation in southern Bioko made it necessary to maintain strategic and legal marriage alliances such as *rivala re eoto* in order to make their offspring legitimate and guarantee their succession to political and religious office.

This union was the legal marriage that the *mochuku* (kings and political and religious chiefs) made with a virgin, *eoto* (virginity), and it was associated with polygyny, a practice that was restricted to these upper hierarchies. By means of this legal union, the woman acquired the right to inherit her husband's belongings. In this kind of marriage, the *voolo*, which literally means value or wealth was established, that is, the "bridewealth," the "bride-price," which was met through different goods, principally the *lokó*.¹⁷ The marriage could be arranged at the girl child's birth or even before (if the baby was a boy, he contracted a series of future obligations with his *mochuku*, such as doing agricultural work, hunting, etc.) but it was generally carried out when the young girl reached puberty.¹⁸ This kind of marriage was practiced at least up to the 1940s.¹⁹

I am most interested in analysing legal *mododo* marriage as a reinterpretation of the old-time legal *rivala re eoto* marriage. In order to understand the evolution marriage has undergone from the old times to the present-day ritualization of spirit marriage, I will compare the practices using an outline of the ritual episodes represented in each kind of marriage. It will also be necessary to sketch out the practices women carried out in the past to obtain divorces and to fulfil their mourning obligations when they became widows.

RITUALS IN RIVALA RE EOTO MARRIAGE

The wedding began with the *bula* (to see the moon), a period of confinement, which the young woman had to spend, before the wedding, in her maternal home. The duration varied depending on the young woman's age and ended when she had her first period; because of this, it was usually carried out near to the time she reached puberty.²⁰ This was a period of initiation and instruction.²¹ After the *bula* period, a banquet was given and the woman had to wear the *meuta* (a belt of braided fibres), a symbol of the alliance. She and her new husband made an offering to Uri (the fertility spirit) in the specific spot in the forest where she is worshipped.

Mourning, called *mododo* or *mokondo*, began with the *mokodo momodo kío* (literally: hair off for the deceased husband). The widow had to shave her head as a sign of misfortune and remain secluded in the deceased man's house for 20 days, with no personal ornaments except for

an esparto grass belt in place of the belt she used for her wedding.²² At the end of this confinement, she could change clothes and purify herself of the “contamination” mourning involved by bathing in the ocean or in the river; at this time, she threw her hair, which had previously been cut off, into the water. This is how her *mochue évé* (ugly head) period of misfortune ended, although she still had to spend another 20 days in confinement.

After the 40 days had gone by, she could go out and receive condolence gifts and continue with her ordinary life. Mourning ended later, coinciding with the agricultural ceremony of the yam harvest, the moment at which the widow gave the offering of yams to her deceased husband. Once this entire mourning process was finished, the woman was free and, just like a divorced woman, could marry, but only in a *rijole* (love) union because, legally, she remained united to her deceased husband.

In order to obtain a divorce,²³ a priest had to be consulted first and, by means of an oracle, the spirits gave their approval or not. If they gave their approval, the woman had to carry out the entire process secretly. First, she had to get rid of the symbol of the alliance, the *meuta*, leaving it at the spot of the Uri spirit that had consecrated the union. Then, she had to carry out the *yibi* (leaving bad luck behind). In order to do this, she had to have sexual relations with an unknown man whom she could never see again. This involved leaving her village, and the man could not discover that he was being the object of the *yibi* because, if he did, he could return her bad luck to her. If the woman managed this whole process without being found out, when she returned to her village, she could make her divorce public and she was free to make another match, but only with a *rivala re rijole* (love) union.

MOURNING RITUALS FOR A WEDDING: MODODO MARRIAGE

It is not by chance that this present-day alliance is termed, by extension, *mododo* (mourning) because the nuptial ritual reproduces several elements of the *rivala re eoto* wedding and incorporates the mourning rituals that a woman carried out when she became a widow as well as those she had to fulfil in order to get a divorce.

The wedding begins with the *elovayo* ceremony, the choice of the spirit-husband for the young woman by consulting the oracle. The oracle may reveal the spirit of an ancestor who has not yet been a *mochuku* or the spirit of someone who had been important. When the oracle reveals a person who is still alive, the young woman must wait until his death to make this kind of union.²⁴ This ceremony is either carried out during the young woman’s puberty, when she goes to the capital to continue studying, or, frequently, it is postponed until she has offspring, precisely in order to know who the baby’s legal pater is.

Once the husband is known, as he is deceased, the young widow carries out the *mododo* (hair off for the deceased husband) mourning. The ceremonies are those carried out when legally (*rivala re eoto*) married women became widows and are the ceremonies that are carried out

today by any widow whose husband has a certain hierarchical status (six days of seclusion, hair cutting, disarranged clothing that will later be discarded, purification bath in the river). The difference with respect to the past is that the period of confinement has been reduced from 40 to six days.

The day she bathes in the river, she goes to the forest at night accompanied by the oldest woman in her matrilineal clan. There, she lays down naked on the ground and they both wait until they hear the first sound produced in the forest (an animal, the wind, plants moving, and so on), indicating the presence of the spirit, her *mochuku*. After this contact with her spirit-husband, the young woman returns to the village.²⁵ The next day, she wears the characteristic mourning adornments and bracelets and walks through the village visiting relatives and neighbours to receive the gifts (formerly condolence gifts), which are now congratulatory gifts for the alliance she has just made.

Before this first phase of marriage concludes, the woman carries out a version of the old divorce ritual, *yibi* (leaving the bad luck to another man). Today she must spend the night outside of her village, although she no longer must have sexual relations with another man. This episode is now more a motive for joking among the young men who pay attention to the girls going through this process in order to take advantage and try to have sexual relations with them, without caring that it could be considered a joke on them. They even, according to one informant, hope to be chosen as “candidates to have the bad luck left to them.” From this moment to the last phase of this marriage alliance, which takes place in the month of November, during the *roomo* (yam harvest) agricultural ceremony, the woman is in mourning and cannot live with her husband (if she is already married in the *del país* fashion). Because of this, it is common to begin the entire process near to the *roomo* ceremony time in order to complete all the ceremonies in the briefest time possible; if the young woman is out of the country and cannot carry out the process, she can even, today, skip this last phase of the ritual. The young woman ends her mourning during the beginning of *roomo* with an offering of yams to her *mochuku* (deceased husband). After the offering, she bathes in the river again and leaves the hair cut at the beginning of the mourning-wedding there. This is when she concludes the period called *mochué évé* (ugly head), that is, the entire mourning process ends, and she can now live with any man.

WIDOW AND DIVORCED BUT STILL MARRIED: RITES OF PASSAGE FOR A STATUS TRANSITION

During the ritual process of present-day *mododo* marriage, the woman goes through a triple symbolic transition in her status: widow, divorced woman, free woman.

In the first phase, during the choice of the *mochuku* by the oracle, the woman goes from being single to being married to her ritual husband, the spirit. The consumma-

tion of the marriage, which is symbolically staged in the forest episode, reinforces the meaning of alliance that characterises this phase of the ritual. In the second phase, the alliance becomes mourning for the new, already deceased, husband. The woman goes from being married to be a widow. In the third phase of the process, the woman is symbolically divorced. Formerly, by achieving a divorce, she managed to break her *rivala re eoto* alliance; however, in the present-day context, this has other connotations because the woman remains legally married but is free to begin new relations or to continue her conjugal life. The conditions she acquires in the ritual process place the woman, simultaneously, in a triple status: she is a legally married wife, a widow, and a woman who is symbolically divorced and free to be able to have offspring with other men.

THE SPIRIT-HUSBAND AND THE “THIEF”-GENITOR. IMPLICATIONS OF MODODO FOR THE WOMEN’S CONDITION

Mododo marriage on the one hand provides legitimacy for the woman’s offspring and on the other frees her from the strict prescriptions involved in *rivala re eoto* marriage by moving them to a symbolic plane. In this ritual process, differences have appeared between the marriage practices of the past and those of the present day, involving certain changes in the situation of women today.

– First, the fact that the legal husband is now always a dead man has fundamental consequences:

– The woman does not have to live with her husband’s family and there is no polygamy.

– Because of her husband’s condition as a spirit, the woman must venerate him and give offerings, so *mododo* also takes on connotations of protection.

– Although this is also a marriage that is arranged (through an oracle), it does not affect the woman’s daily life, as she has control over her sexual relations and her conjugal life.

– There is obviously no requirement of virginity for the woman, and its previous relevance is now relegated to the symbolic plane. It is exceptionally ritualised in the forest episode and the meaning attributed by the Bubis also corroborates this when they say that:

“The *mochuku* is who has to open the woman up so that she can have children later, he is the first one... the real husband is the *mochuku* and her husband in real life, who sleeps with her every day, who goes to the farm with her... well, he’s a thief, he takes his wife away to make children with her. Since it is with the spirit’s consent, for a good thing, there’s no punishment... I mean, we call him “thief,” but the man has worked, he has made two, three children... but in the tradition, he does not count apart from helping, he’s there to finish the job.”²⁶

This paragraph illustrates the meaning that the “thief-man” and the *mochuku* take on in relation to the wife and to her offspring. The “thief” tends to be the object of

jokes and comments, even despective comments, in order to make evident the secondary position he occupies in relation to the *mochuku*. What these two figures represent is the transfer of sexual rights over the woman that the spirit-husband transfers to the genitor, who is only a mediator and who symbolically steals his wife. But the legal husband keeps his rights over her offspring.

– Therefore, another relevant consequence of *mododo* marriage is that the legal father of any children the woman may have is also a spirit. This involves a dissociation of the different functions of paternity in two different figures: on one hand, the *mochuku*, the legal pater, and, on the other hand, the genitor, necessary to provide the spirit with offspring and who also fulfils the function of social father.²⁷

– The ease with which a woman can find a partner due to this splitting of the figure between the legal husband and the genitor has favoured the practice of sequential unions which are sometimes *de país* marriages and at other times cohabitation. This marriage pattern is also possible due to the nature of the Bubi ethnic group’s *de país* marriage and to the old-time *rivala re rijole* (for love) marriage, in which there is no bridewealth. Bonelli Rubio (1934, p. 517) corroborates this in the first half of the 20th century, stating that, “in Moka, it is common for couples to change, either because of the husband’s boredom or the wife’s coquetry, with no resentment between them or scandal for the rest.” The fact is that these “sequential unions” frequently give rise to a matrifocal family composition and a kind of matrilocal residence in which the woman has more autonomy with respect to her husband and can count on the support of her family group for raising her children.

It is also significant that this facility and freedom enjoyed by Bubi women who are legally married in the *mododo* fashion is obtained from two statuses – those of a divorced woman and a widow. Although they are ritual statuses, they represent two situations of restrictions in other societies: it is almost impossible to obtain a divorce and widowhood means continuing to be under the control of the deceased man’s family. However, there is proof that Bubi widows already had a more privileged position, as Aymemí (1943, p. 12) stated in a posthumous article published at the beginning of the 20th century: “with the husband dead, the family lacks authority to resell her, they only maintain their authority over the children and, if there are none, over the children born to the widow and any other man... The wife never becomes part of the husband’s family... Once a widow, a Bubi woman enjoys complete freedom with no one having authority over her.”

In short, a Bubi woman’s freedom with regard to her marriage relations, both in *de país* marriage and *mododo* marriage, contrasts with the situation of women in nearby ethnic groups with polygamous and markedly patrilineal societies, where marrying legally and legitimising her offspring involves, for the woman, being more isolated from her group, and where divorce depends on returning the bridewealth.

CONSTRUCTING ETHNIC IDENTITY BASED ON DIFFERENTIATION AND DIVERSITY

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, evangelisation managed, partly, to impose some of the values and practices of Catholicism; it also managed to get part of the population to marry canonically. But, above all, it managed to make polygamy lose social acknowledgment among the Bubis. With time, they began to identify with values such as monotheism, monogamous marriage, the rejection of bridewealth, and other values that ended up being assimilated by Bubi culture. But this appropriation is not only an achievement of the missionaries. Another factor has influenced this as much as or more than the moral ideas of evangelisation: the fact of having adopted these values as their own signs of Bubi ethnic identity, in contrast to the majority Fang ethnic group.²⁸

“They [the Fang] have never had kings, they are always going around lost... We Bubis do not have several wives, nor do we buy them like the Pamues [Fang] do,²⁹ that is why they have to run away, go into discotheques, and have problems. You won’t find any Bubi woman like that ... The worst sorcery is the Pamues’ sorcery; the Bubi religion is beneficial, our spirits are there to help.”³⁰

The imaginary about the Bubi and their religion that was constructed based on the evangelisation policy has influenced the creation of their ethnic identity based, partly, on references that define “being Bubi” in opposition to being Fang. The evangelisation discourse took advantage of this Bubi rejection of certain “Fang” practices to feed the stereotypes about both groups: the image of the “pacific Bubi, a good Christian,” in contrast to an image of the “warlike, savage Fang,” reinforcing this interethnic differentiation.

On the other hand, this idea of Bubi ethnic unity as opposed to the “other” contributes to showing a degree of group identity homogeneity, but it is evident that, throughout the colonial period, an important process of internal Bubi diversification had taken place. Bubi cultural heterogeneity is expressed not only in the different Bubi dialects, but also in the kinship norms observed among the northernmost and southernmost villages on the island. An example of this is the diversity of forms of legal paternity and of legitimising marriage and offspring that we have analysed. The different developments Bubi society has undergone have to do with the most recent history of their “colonial encounter,” with the clash with other African populations on the island, and also with the process by which Bioko was settled in different migratory waves, supposedly coming from the continent, displaced by other Bantu peoples (Martí, R. 2000).

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In this text, I analyse how the historical-political development of Bubi society in a specific period accelerated the expansion of evangelisation on Bioko Island and the changes that both processes provoked in Bubi social structure, particularly in marriage alliances. I also present

the kinds of marriage that exist today and analyse the evolution from the old-time practices to today’s. In the first half of the 20th century, two factors converged that were decisive in the transformation of legal *rivala re eoto* marriage into today’s *mododo* practice.

On the one hand is the loss of power and political function of the traditional chieftainships and the dismantling of the hierarchical organisation of Bubi society and, on the other, the final expansion of Spanish colonial government and of the evangelising mission, due, to a large extent, to the decadence of the governing monarchy at the beginning of the century.

With the decay of Bubi power and its political institutions, it was no longer as necessary to ensure the continuity of the chieftainships and, therefore, to control marriage alliances between hierarchical clans. With the replacement of local power with colonial power, the number of chiefs decreased and they became older and older, meaning the practice of polygyny also decreased. All of this favoured building alliances once the man who was to be the legal husband had died. In other words, it encouraged the practice of *mododo* in which an alliance is established with the spirit of the deceased in order to continue conferring legitimate affiliation of the descent group upon children. Ritualisation through the already-deceased legal husband became an increasingly frequent practice that was no longer limited to those with higher status: it was extended to the entire population of the southern villages on the island as the traditional, legal form of marriage. This text focuses on the analysis of this ritualization of *mododo* marriage and shows the influence symbolic practices have in producing changes in society, in this case, particularly for Bubi women.

Along general lines, the different kinds of Bubi marriage, whether they be the *mododo* form, the *de país* version, or the possibility that some women have of having both kinds of union, allow a woman to obtain full social and legal recognition (this was previously only acquired through legal *re eoto* marriage for virginity), and to enjoy the freedom to control and decide over their conjugal lives.

The dissociation of the functions of paternity that takes place in *mododo* marriage in contrast to *de país* marriage reveals the diversity of ways of making offspring legitimate among the Bubis; in short, it also reveals heterogeneity in Bubi marriage practices. This internal diversity in different Bubi cultural practices has shaped their ethnic identity together with the inverse process of unity, defined mainly in contrast to the Fang ethnic group. In this process of constructing Bubi ethnic identity, both colonial practices and the discourses of evangelisation have had a notorious influence and have reinforced interethnic differences.

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NOTES

- 1 Bioko is a 2017 km² island that is part of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea. The Bubi ethnic group is the second-largest in Equatorial Guinea, although it represents only 6.5% of a population of approximately 1,014,999. Despite being the original ethnic group on Bioko Island (26,462 inhabitants) they are not the majority there either, according to the latest official data from Equatorial Guinea’s General Directorate of Statistics and National Accounts from 2001 (not updated or reliable).
- 2 In Fernández Moreno (2013), I discuss the transformation of Bubi political structure resulting from Spanish colonial contact at the end of the 19th century. The 20th century is analysed in Fernández Moreno (2018) in relation to Bubi resistance to colonisation and evangelisation.
- 3 The first Spanish Governor was Carlos de Chacón y Michelena in 1858. In the 20th century, during full colonial expansion, the Governor General, Ángel Barrera, was in charge.
- 4 In 1883, the first Claretian missionaries arrived in the city of Santa Isabel (now Malabo), where they remained until 1978, when the Macías dictatorship expelled the last missionaries left in Equatorial Guinea. After this period they returned and remain there today. As well as the Claretians, the Conceptionist order also had a presence.
- 5 <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/historycultures/research/news/2017/marriage-in-africa.aspx>
- 6 I began research on Bioko with a first long term of fieldwork from 1988 to 1992 and two shorter periods in 1995 and 1997. Later, I did fieldwork for short one-month periods in 2001, 2008, and 2009. In different research projects, I have continued to carry out specific fieldwork actions in 2013, 2014 and 2018.
- 7 This is the approximate date of the earliest memories of the elders interviewed from 1990 onward.
- 8 Information gathered from four elderly women from the village of Ureka who were married according to the traditional rites when they were adolescents. Conversation taken from a personal interview. Field notes in February 1992. The old women didn’t know exactly their age.
- 9 I recorded the genealogy of the entire population of Ureka (80 women and 74 men), which gave me the chance to interview many of the women in each village. I have also had eight key informants throughout my research. The Life Stories of four women and their families from different villages should also be highlighted, especially those from Moka, where for 30 years I have had regular contact with the daughters and now granddaughters of the first informants, some of whom currently live in France and Spain. This has enabled me to continue updating and expanding the research. For this study in particular, coinciding with my last periods of fieldwork, I was able to conduct ethnographic research about their trips to Bioko, specifically to perform the “choice of *mochuku*”, the ritualisation of their *mododo* marriages. Interview and Field notes in the city of Malabo and the village of Moka (September 2018. Informants: two women, mother (45 years old) and daughter 26 years old)
- 10 Specifically, the only materials on Bubi kinship and marriage in anthropology prior to the year 2000 are my own publications (Fernández Moreno 1993, 1999). Later publications in this area are Fernández Moreno (2005, 2012) and Aixelà-Cabrè (2008) regarding Bubi kinship and Aixelà-Cabrè (2009, 2011, 2013)

contemporary marriage practices among the whole of the Equatorial Guinean population.

- 11 I am referring to the documentation up to independence in 1968. After that, the country became totally isolated during the first Macías Nguema dictatorship (there is no research at all). The second dictatorship, which continues today, began in 1979 with the coup d’état by Obiang Nguema. Although there was a slight opening to rebuild the country during the early 1980s, there was no scientific anthropological production about Bioko until 1988 when I began my research. Because of this, I have been able to carry out a very complete review of the documentation on marriage, on kinship, and on the Bubi ethnic group in general. I would like to point out that there has been relevant research in the case of the continental peoples of Equatorial Guinea.
- 12 In his book *Los bubis*, Aymemí devotes 15 pages to puberty, marriage, punishments for adultery, and widowhood. It was published in 1942, after his death, but he wrote it in 1894. Aymemí lived on the island for 47 years and spoke the Bubi language fluently, which allowed him to acquire previously undiscovered knowledge about the Bubis and their religion. Despite the ideological biases, this is the first ethnography of the Bubis.
- 13 Baumann, an Austrian Methodist missionary, narrates his two-month-long trip to Bioko Island. But the content is not comparable to what Aymemí’s work offers. The extensive work by the German Tessmann, despite being considered the first ethnography of Bubi culture and despite his having lived on Bioko for two years, only describes material culture; he only devotes a couple of pages to marriage. Martin del Molino, trained as an archeologist and anthropologist, is, like Tessmann, also linked to the diffusionist school, as his unilineal interpretations of Bubi religion show. He lived on Bioko Island during the 1950s and 1960s. His work was published decades later.
- 14 Bridewealth can reach the figure of €4,000 (the average monthly salary is €250 and the minimum monthly salary is €169) (Aixelà-Cabrè, 2009, p. 3).
- 15 *Mododo* is the most frequent term in the southern dialect (*mokondo* in the southeastern area) to designate the mourning process in general. Further on in the text, I will explain the reason for this denomination. The southern villages where this kind of marriage is practiced are Bocoricho, Belebú, Boemeriba, Ruiché, Batete, and especially, Moka, where the Bubi monarch lived and where I gathered the ethnographic data on this kind of marriage. According to the information I obtained, this kind of marriage was also practiced in villages in the northernmost part of the island such as Baloeri and Batoicopo (northwest) and in Bao and Basakato (northeast).
- 16 This form of address is used to designate the king and clan chiefs, and to refer to any man with a certain hierarchical status. The ritual husbands tend to be the spirits of relevant characters or people who held office.
- 17 Strings of small shell beads used as currency and as bodily adornment.
- 18 I was told that women did not have their children with their *mochuku* because, while they were little girls, the *mochuku* were old men. They did not force the young girls to live with them and when the girls reached puberty, the *mochuku* had already died.
- 19 The description of the wedding, in addition to the references by Aymemí (1943), come from the testimony of the only four elderly women who were married according to the *eoto* rite. I carried out these interviews in 1990 in the village of Ureka. These women, about 70 years old (they did not remember their exact age), were the last generation to participate in this kind of marriage. The rest of the accounts came from women who told the version that their mothers, already dead, had told them about their *eoto* marriages.
- 20 *Bula* alludes to a woman’s menstruation and to the possibility of conceiving and is intimately linked to her virginity. By extension, this kind of marriage sometimes receives the same name. Other times this period is referred to as “being seated” because the young woman was inactive and was “fattened up.”

- 21 The young girl was taught the domestic obligations that she would have as a wife and was taught not to be unfaithful to her husband; adultery was harshly punished (Tessmann, 1923; and Aymemí, 1943, pp.46–50).
- 22 The bodily signs of her mourning state were: body paint with clay (yellow clay and ash) and braided fiber rings on her knees, forearms, and upper arms.
- 23 According to the information provided to me, divorce was exceptional and no one knew of any cases of divorce after a legal *rivala re eoto* marriage; this suggests that, given the prescriptions it involved, in practice it was more of a dissuasionary norm than a real one.
- 24 This *mochuku* comes from the clan to which the young woman has been ritually assigned. There are complex rules for distributing female offspring; depending on the order of birth, they are alternately distributed to the maternal clans and the clan of the legal pater.
- 25 This episode is often simplified, with a trip to an isolated spot outside of the village, returning after just a short time.
- 26 Conversation taken from field notes.
- 27 On the rest of the island, as I have indicated, all the functions are taken on by the genitor, the *de país* husband.
- 28 The Bubis have maintained a rivalry with the Fang ethnic group since the colonial period when they were brought to the island to work on the cocoa plantations. The Fang ethnic group has governed since independence with dictatorial governments which, though they affect the entire Equatorial Guinean population, have provoked a feeling of aversion in the Bubis that extends to the entire Fang ethnic group.
- 29 *Pamue* is a term introduced by the colonists to refer to the Fang and is used by the Bubis with despective connotations.
- 30 Conversation taken from a personal interview. Field notes (Moka village. Sept. 2018 informant: 49 years old man, bubí traditional priest)

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