

# **“YOU HAVE A BABY AND I’LL CLIMB A TREE”<sup>1</sup>: GENDER RELATIONS PERCEIVED THROUGH ENGA PROVERBS AND SAYINGS ABOUT WOMEN**

*Philip Gibbs*

## **1. Introduction**

Taken literally, the saying among the Enga of the Papua New Guinea Highlands that, “women don’t climb trees” (*Endame ita kisala naenge*), is not true. Enga women can and do climb trees. However, the saying has more than its literal meaning for the Enga. This common saying might be heard from a man when he wants to prevent a woman from doing something, for instance, the words in the title of this essay were used in response to male criticism, by a woman aspiring to become an elected politician. Women also might direct the saying at a man who is not doing the work expected of him. For example, a woman might use the expression combining literal and figurative senses to express her annoyance if her husband returned home without bringing firewood.

Early anthropological accounts noted aggressiveness and antagonism in gender relations in the Papua New Guinea Highlands (Read 1954). Meggitt (1964) observed that in (Mae) Enga culture, relationships between men and women were characterised by (male) fear of sexuality and of pollution, and frequent conflict between men and women.<sup>2</sup> Modernity has helped reduce fear in gender relations, and it is now more apparent that conflict is by no means restricted to men and women, but frequently erupts between men, and also between women (Wiessner 2004:155).

Gender differences still structure relationships between men and women in Enga society, creating a high degree of dependency between them. Men depend on women for domestic tasks like supplying food and raising children. They also rely on their influence

in establishing and maintaining relationships with the woman's relatives. Women depend on men for constructing houses and fences, and supplying firewood. They also rely on their husbands' relatives, since most often Enga residence is *patrilocal*. Men tend to play a dominant role in public life, yet, as Kyakas and Wiessner show in *From Inside the Women's House* (1992), much more influence comes from inside the women's house than is obvious at first. Women exert influence over public affairs through private channels.

Gender studies have benefited from the feminist critique of distorted images of women in patriarchal societies. However, it is only with the "third-wave" feminist consciousness that the voices of Third World women have started to be heard (Clifford 2001:25-27). Moreover, there has been a fresh realisation that gender relations are about right relations between men and women in all dimensions of culture at every level of society. In Papua New Guinea, gender relations are about (*right*) relations in a community that is made up of males and females. This paper will attempt to develop that theme from an Enga perspective based on Enga proverbs and sayings.

The primary data for the paper are a number of Enga proverbs and sayings that refer to women. There seems not to be the same body of Enga proverbs and sayings about men. As will be seen, these proverbs and sayings illustrate men's attitudes to women, yet women themselves seem not to have a similar corpus of proverbs and sayings that would demonstrate a well-defined public stance towards men.

The intention in this paper is to use the proverbs and sayings as a key to a deeper understanding of gender relations (and gender bias) in Enga society today. Because the paper is based on a set of proverbs and sayings, it is by no means an exhaustive treatment of gender relations in Enga. The interpretive response to these proverbs and sayings comes principally from two workshops conducted at Par in the Enga Province in May 2003. The first three-day workshop had eighteen male participants. The second three-day workshop was attended by twelve women.<sup>3</sup> There are some cultural variations within the Enga Province. The language and ideas in this paper reflect the culture of the Central Enga District.

## 2. Proverbs and Sayings

In Papua New Guinea, the more abstract the concept or more deeply felt the experience, the greater the likelihood that it will be expressed in symbols. This is certainly the case with the Enga people of the Central New Guinea Highlands.<sup>4</sup> Those skilled in public speaking have developed oratorical skills using symbolic language, which demands attention and stimulates the imagination. The language ranges from colourful sayings, metaphors and proverbs, to lengthy allegories and stories. In the Enga language, there is an equivalent general term: *kongali pii* (symbolic [lit: opposite] speech). However, there are various particular terms (Gibbs 2000b:187). The term *pii lapae singi* refers to sayings, and *maku yandaita*, is the preferred term for proverbs. Enga people also use expressions that could be called “proverbial metaphors” because elements within the phrase may change according to the creative ability of the speaker. For simplicity, the term “sayings” will be used throughout this text.

## 3. Construction of Gender Consciousness

From a young age, Enga boys and girls are made aware of gender differences. Young boys can roam naked, but even small girls are normally provided with some form of pubic covering. As they mature, boys wear trousers and girls wear skirts. From early years, a girl will be shown how to wear a net-bag on her head and is expected to help her older female relatives carry food items from the gardens. She will learn that she can work in the sweet potato gardens, but foods such as sugarcane or taro are “male” and to be left for men to tend. Boys have more freedom to roam around in groups without the company of their fathers. Young girls will be taught behaviour proper for women such as sitting on the women’s side of the house, not stepping over any part of a man’s body, or over food or cooking utensils. They will be called *kaki* by their female siblings and *pakae* or “susa” or “this girl” (*wanakudake*) by male siblings, while they in turn will learn to call their brothers “brata” or “this boy” (*wanedake*). The apparent impersonal form of address in the latter terms (this girl/ boy) reflects strong incest taboos operating in Enga culture.

Through such forms of socialisation, boys and girls in Enga quickly develop gender consciousness. Boys will develop their own

individual characters guided by values such as respect (for older men and women such as their sisters), industriousness, discipline, and promoting the strength of the community/clan (Gibbs 2003:64-67). Girls will develop, guided by values associated with garden, hearth and home. A woman should be hospitable, disciplined, fertile and hard-working. She should also delay her own gratification in favour of her brothers or her husband and in this way achieve good standing in the community (Gibbs 2003:68-70). Above all, she is taught that she is born to become a man's wife: "The girl is born for a man" (*Wanaku akalinya lao mandenge*). Thus, many values instilled in young girls are to prepare them for marriage. It is said, "One does not see girls' bones" (*Wanaku kuli nakandenge*). In other words, in the Enga patrilocal society, she will move to live in her husband's land and will be buried there, not where she grew up.

#### 4. Negative Images

Many Enga sayings appear to portray women in a negative light. It is widely believed that women's thoughts are shallow (*masepae muu* = lit: thinking short). Men and women attribute this to women being more emotional than men. Men are believed to have more self-control in public, whereas it is said that a woman will more easily burst into tears or lapse into silence and then respond with a stick or a stone. Women agree that the expression is unflattering, but most accept it as true, and admit that there is little they can do about it.

Another saying, "If you give a pandanus nut to a woman she will eat it whether it is good or not" (*Anga koo maitenopa endame yaka lao nenge*), refers to a woman who is unable to distinguish between what is good or bad. The inference is that women do not have the capacity to judge right from wrong. This is a commonly held belief in Enga society, more so in male circles, but also accepted very often by women.

Men are supposed to be sensible, self-controlled, and able to distinguish between good and bad. Women reputedly act without thinking first. Consider the saying, "A woman lights a fire at the base of pandanus tree" (*Endame anga tengenya ita yangao palyengi*). Literally the saying refers to a silly woman who unthinkingly lights a fire at the base of a pandanus tree, consequently burning the leaves at the top where the fruit should appear.

There are many similar sayings that imply that women are mindless. For example, "You send your wife or child to go and fetch salt and they bring back a rolled up woman's grass skirt" (*Enda wanepimi aipi nyala pena lengesa kuta kapa nyoo epenge*). Traditionally, salt was manufactured by burning wood that had been soaked in salt springs. The salty ashes were wrapped up tightly in pandanus leaves. An unused grass skirt was rolled into a bundle similar to the bundle of salt. The saying refers to a woman or child mistaking a rolled up grass skirt for a bundle of salt. The presumption here is that women and children do not have the capacity to distinguish one from the other.

## 5. When a Man is a Woman

At the beginning of the study, the writer was of the impression that the negative images of women in proverbs and sayings were used as an explicit put-down for women. As the study progressed, it became apparent that such sayings are used more often to insult or taunt men by attributing to them characteristics considered typical of women. Women normally do not speak formally at public gatherings (*Endame kama maku nalenge*). A woman might direct this saying to a man in order to shame him: "Don't say you can do something if you're not able to do it. You don't have pigs or money. You are a woman who should keep quiet!"

The example in the previous section about a woman lighting a fire at the base of a pandanus tree would be directed at a man who seems not to care if he is stirring up trouble in the community. The intention is to pour scorn on the man by suggesting that he has no sense (like a woman!). The other saying about sending a woman or child to fetch salt might be applied to a male community leader, warning him not to send a young man to go and sort out a problematic situation. The older man should go there and deal with the situation himself.

The saying, "Don't be a girl who is like a little frog that sees water and squeals for joy," (*Wanakoli winjiwana [monge] ipa dii yapa putiti kaekae napipi*) has a similar meaning. Once it sees water, the frog does not care about anything else and begins croaking. The saying, in a literal sense, refers to a young girl who is not old enough

to take part in courting parties, but goes around chattering and disturbing everyone else. When applied to a man, especially during a public speech, it is telling him to stop talking so as to let someone else more important have the opportunity to speak. "Listen to me, you *winjiwana*...!"

Sexual references are often part of Enga sayings, however, the underlying meaning is not necessarily sexual. Consider for example the saying, "A woman pointing a spear towards her genitals" (*Enda kendaiyame baanya ongonyaka nyoo tuu lenge*). When men dance, they hold a long spear across one shoulder horizontal to the ground. When women dance, they sometimes use both hands to grasp a short spear held vertically. Those in the men's workshop said that when a woman holds the spear as she dances, one end points towards her genitals (the women at the workshop did not like the saying and said that it was typical of men to see something sexual in a woman holding a spear). Nevertheless, the saying is used to tell a man that he is drawing attention to himself and not listening to others. "You are not listening! You are like a woman pointing ..."

Far more insulting is the expression, "A woman bearing a penis" (*Enda kisa pongo mandenge*). Such an expression might be used by an exasperated wife to a husband who appears useless, not bringing home firewood, or letting another man trick him into giving away a pig. "You are useless. You are a man by accident!"

## 6. Value of Women

The sayings given above, directed toward men, infer that a man shares the reputed weakness and mindlessness of women. Yet in real life, men recognise the value of women. From a man's point of view, women are important in their role as producers of food and wealth, for the relationships made possible through their kin, and sometimes for companionship. To a large extent, women accept this value system, interpreting it in the light of their domestic goals associated with providing for the family.

There are several sayings that refer to the value of a woman getting bride wealth for her kin, or the respect she earns for her

husband through her industriousness, for example, “A girl who gets bride wealth has a name” (*Wanaku yole nyingi dupa kenge singi*). Payments from her husband’s clan to her relatives continue, especially when she has children. Without such payments, a woman might be ridiculed: “You haven’t brought back pigs. You are worthless. You don’t have a name.” The expression, “How much bought you?” (*Akipateme sambemipi?*), could be used by one woman to taunt another. The negative connotation is linked, not to her being “bought”, but to the (small) number of pigs in her bride wealth or, these days, to no bride wealth at all.

A woman will bring fame to her husband through her industriousness in maintaining food gardens, raising pigs, and bearing children. This enables her husband to get a “name” from having pigs and money to give in bride wealth payments for other men’s marriages, for compensation payments, or (formerly) to use in the *tee* pig exchange.<sup>5</sup> While a man gets a name through such beneficence, a woman gets her name from her work and through bearing children. The women at the workshop complained that they often felt that they worked like servants or slaves (*kendemane / akalinya manki*), with little appreciation: “We do the hard work and our husbands get the credit.”

The men at the workshop acknowledged how much they rely on their wives. Yet the nuclear family has limited value in relation to the clan, or extended family. There is a saying: “You will (have to) carry the ridge pole of the house only with your wife” (*Anda imaita enda pipa iki sete lea*). It is used to teach young men the importance of cooperating with their brothers. Just as a man and his wife alone could not carry the heavy ridge pole of a house, so a man will always need the help and cooperation of his brothers in bearing life’s difficulties. If he is selfish and individualistic, forgetting his community/clan, will he and his wife alone have enough resources to fulfill demands for compensation payments?

Men acknowledge that women are particularly gifted in raising pigs, which are the basic unit of wealth in traditional Enga society. During the workshops, there was a difference of opinion about the meaning of the saying, “Women sleep together with pigs” (*Enda menapipa tole palenge*). The men claimed that the traditional

separation of men and women in different houses was desirable because women are too noisy and men need to go to the men's house to get some peace and quiet. The inference was that men should not have to listen to women's "chatter". The women, however, saw the saying in a positive light. Sleeping in the same house together with pigs is indicative of how women are much better at caring for pigs than men. If a pig gets wild, they noted how a man would only further enrage the pig, whereas a woman has a way of talking to the pig so as to calm it down.

Women are valued not just in their daily domestic role, but also as a potential source of help in time of need. People say that if they go to the forest and discover a hole where a possum sleeps, they keep it a secret and treat that tree with great care. It is a place to return to when one needs a possum to eat or (formerly) to use in a religious ritual. Thus the saying, "A girl is like a hole where a possum sleeps" (*Wanaku saa sita*), refers to the value of a woman to help in time of need. The point of the saying is: if you treat a young woman with care, later she will reward you when you are in need. "A girl's net bag contains something good" (*Wanaku nuu ongo lyini pingi*). Your sister will not come to visit without bringing something in her net bag to share with you. Similarly, if you treat a young woman with respect, one day you will be rewarded when she distributes some of the valuables from her bride wealth.

## 7. Women as 'Bridges'

Men respect a woman's capacity, not only to maintain contact with her relatives, but also to establish links between enemy clans through marriage. "A girl forms a bridge" (*Wanakumi endaki toko pingi*). By entering into a marriage with an enemy clan, a woman "sews up" the enmity between the two groups (*Baa yanda kii pingi*). She would be told that it doesn't matter how handsome or ugly her husband is. She is to sacrifice her own desires. "He is not a beautiful feather that you carry around to show off. You are helping your family by helping to bring about peace." The establishment of new relationships through marriage serves not only to resolve fights, but also acts as insurance in other times of trouble. For example, in the Kandep region of Enga, where there is occasional frost, which destroys the food gardens, it is important to have a woman to act as a bridge



so that the family can move to lower regions to find food. Nowadays some politicians enter into multiple marriages to build up political support.

Acting as a bridge can enable women to act as intermediaries. However, it can also lead to a conflict of interest on her part since she never really relinquishes her social identity in her clan of origin. She can visit her kin and seek refuge there when necessary. Marilyn Strathern's observation about women in Mount Hagen applies also to Enga: women cannot unambiguously participate in the political confrontation of clans, for they represent the interpersonal links between them (Strathern 1972:154).

## 8. Choices

Despite the fact that men acknowledge the value of women in their domestic roles and in acting as bridges in (re)establishing relationships, women were and still are considered as political minors. They are also jural minors in as much as politics enters into the court system. Women have little choice in the political arena and generally have to follow the decisions of their husbands or male relatives.

The sayings considered at the workshop had little comment on women's choices. On the surface, sayings might appear to refer to women, but since proverbs and sayings are mainly public speech directed towards men, they may be more relevant to the way men make choices. For example, some sayings warn men in choosing how to treat women. Consider the saying, "If a woman (dog) appears alone, you must not touch it because the owner will be following" (*Endapi [yanapi] mende iki epea kandeno minae nalape tange ongo maitanya epengena*). The women in the workshop liked this saying. In a literal sense the saying is warning men not to touch a lone woman because her husband or a male relative will most probably be nearby. In a deeper sense it warns men about harming anyone because everyone belongs to a clan and that clan will seek recompense for any injury or mistreatment of one of their clan members.

There is a similar saying telling young men to control themselves, "You should not go to a distant place with a young woman, or it will be like a dog smelling a possum" (*Wanaku mapukae pipa kaita londe tole napupape wanaku saa tunduma pipae*). Dogs are attracted by the scent

of a possum. In the same way, a young man should not touch a young woman or get close to her lest he be overcome by the sweet "scent". Again, the women in the workshop were full of praise for this saying. They said that it applies particularly to the time when people go into the mountains to harvest pandanus nuts. There, away from the familiar domestic arrangements, young women are more vulnerable to men's advances.

Another rather colourful saying refers to a woman throwing a flower into a river and a man jumping in after it. (*Endame poto dii pyandeamopa akali ipaka pyake*). The image is of a man attracted to a woman and in order to get rid of him, she takes a flower out from beneath her grass skirt and throws it into the water. The man, overcome by sexual fantasies, jumps into the water after the flower. The saying would be used to point out that a man has hastily come to a wrong conclusion. For example, if a young man saw another man wearing a feather and mistakenly assumes that the feather is his (that was stolen), the accused might reply, "You should check properly first. Don't be like the man who ..."

The use of sexual imagery does not always indicate a sexual meaning. A saying about the incapacity to choose, "When a woman is naked a man cannot say no" (*Enda kuta lyokapae silyamopa akali kayapala napenge*), might be heard in the context of a clan anticipating compensation. Everything is ready, and then the host clan wants to put it off for a while. The group hoping for the compensation might use the saying, for they have seen the money and pigs, so how can they leave at that point! There is a similar saying without the sexual reference: "When the fence is broken down the pig will not turn back" (*Kame kalupae silyamopa mename kaepala napenge*). Mothers use this saying to warn their daughters. "The way you look at a man is already breaking the fence!"<sup>6</sup>

## 9. Power

In traditional Enga society, women often feared men because of their power to harm them physically, through beatings or even the cutting of a tendon in a woman's leg so that she would become lame. Men's fear of women was more connected with the potential for women to shame a man in public, or fears that a woman would

weaken a man through neglecting menstrual taboos. When a woman started her period, she would ask a child to go and tell her husband that “the fire in the house has gone out”. He would then know to stay away for five days.

The taboos are not applied so strictly now, but men still feel that women have power to affect a man's health and well-being. The saying, “Quarrelling over carrying the head or the lower part of a woman's dead body” (*Enda yaki [yakita] kenge kaita saa aiyomba kaita saa latala atete pingi*) illustrates this power. Customarily, men carry bodies for burial.<sup>7</sup> However, according to Enga belief, a man risks becoming *angupae* (weak) in touching a woman's legs (or anything in close proximity to her genitals). The incongruity of the situation in the saying lies in the fact that a man will become impure by the mere fact of carrying a corpse and it does not really matter which end of the corpse he carries. Women, or the burial of a woman have no integral part in the underlying meaning of the saying, which might be used when someone has made a point in a discussion or argument and another person draws attention to him or herself by trying to make the same point. Perhaps the two have their own opinions, but there is little point in arguing. It refers to the futility of arguing over the same thing.

At first the women in the workshop laughed on hearing this saying. However, on further reflection, they said they did not like it because it brought back memories of how in traditional Enga society, women's bodies would often be treated with little respect. Corpses were often thrown into a hole and stamped upon, and sometimes wooden stakes were thrust into the eye sockets of the dead woman's body, in an effort to prevent her ghost returning to haunt the living.

Women who do not want to submit to male decisions can resort to the power of protest. A woman can take a pig or her belongings and go back to her natal clan. She might leave the children, including a child still being breast fed, which will be very inconvenient and embarrassing for the husband. One of the worst protest actions would be to refer to her former boyfriends in front of her husband.<sup>8</sup> In situations such as these, the myth that women are shallow thinking (*masepae muu*) can be useful, for it can allow room for protest action without severe punishment.

## 10. Invisible but not Absent

Even in the most exclusive rituals (such as Enga men's initiation rites), women still have a role to play, particularly as spirit women acting as proxies for real women. Thus, women may be unseen characters, but not absent (Wiessner 2004). There are times too when women are regarded as socially "invisible". There is a well-known saying in Enga: "A girl has no permanent house [place]" (*Wanakunya anda muku nasingi*). When she marries she will leave her natal clan. Therefore, she should show deference to her brother who does have a place and will remain to continue the life of the clan. She will one day physically disappear from her natal clan land.

However, women insist that they have ways of being recognised in their husband's clan. When a girl is married, she hangs a special net bag from her head (*yati nuu*). It is said that by removing that special net bag in her husband's territory, she is claiming that place. Even after her death, her son could say: "My mother took off her *yati nuu* here, so I belong here. My *anda muku* (house-place) is here." Bearing a child also gives a woman land rights. In an argument with her mother-in-law she might respond: "You bore a man here, but so did I. I cut the umbilical chord of my son here" (*Nambanya wane mumbi kepapae angenya singi*). That is also why it is said that an old woman is "rooted" by her house and garden (*Endombake ee motamota, anda motamota*). She belongs there and they cannot send her away.

A woman's place in society cannot be presumed; it is achieved through the fulfilment of her role as wife, mother, and provider. Some sayings are used by mothers to help teach daughters their place in society. A mother will tell her daughter: "Girl, you will 'eat the hand' of your husband's relatives" (*Wanaku, akali tatanya kingi nao palitina pupi*). (The literal term "eat the hand" would best be translated in English as "eat from the hand".) Thus, if she is helpful and co-operative, she will be cared for and will eat well. If not, she may well be neglected, mistreated or ignored. A rebellious girl will be told: "Just as you swallow ginger quickly because it is bitter if it remains in your mouth, so swallow the bitter words of your husband" (*Itamai kaa pilyamopa yapa lao nao goe lenge*). Though she may be invisible in public affairs, a woman is still present and will exert indirect influence in concentrating