

## Stealing a bride: marriage customs, gender roles, and fertility transition in two peasant communities in Bolivia



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### ABSTRACT

This paper deals with changing marriage customs in a pre-transitional setting where nuclear households and relatively high female status have been dominant values. Two Bolivian communities are compared. In one of them, the persistence of early marriages is associated with a specialized agricultural economy where women play roles as wives and mothers as well as partners in agricultural production but are not engaged in autonomous income earning activities. Women maintain a relatively subordinate, even if highly valued, position within the family. Marriage customs are simple, with little parental opposition to early marriage. In the other, economic diversification and tertiarization of the economy, as well as the emergence of a youth culture, are producing a revolution in marriage patterns. Increase in female age at marriage is associated with an extension of spinsterhood, growing acceptance of courtship, and a decline in parental influence over the selection of marriage partners. These are processes promoting both nuclearization and an increase in the bargaining power of women within the nuclear family, conditions for the emergence of favourable attitudes towards birth control. Marriages are taking place later as a consequence of the increasing individualized capacity of females as income earners. Young men achieve independence much later today than in the past, and have to show individual resourcefulness in order to find a wife. Stealing a bride, a ritualized version of elopement, is a key aspect of marriage customs through which men show the ability to constitute a new household.

### Marriage customs, parental authority, and gender roles

The relevance of changes in marriage customs for fertility decline has long been recognized, mainly within the framework of European demographic history (Hajnal 1965; Coale 1973). It is well known that rising female age at marriage, and higher rates of celibacy, affect total fertility even without any changes in marital fertility rates. The relevance of changes in marriage patterns for fertility control within marriage, however, is less clear. Rising age at marriage might precede, or even stimulate, a greater acceptance of birth control. With increasing age at marriage, marital ties become less dependent upon broader kin obligations, an emotional bond within the couple becomes the ideal for mate selection, and gender roles within marriage may become more egalitarian (Brodie 1994). Prolonged spinsterhood and open courtship may set the conditions for individual choice. Women's concerns about childbearing and childraising can be expressed more easily in fertility behaviour when couples are formed on the basis of individual choice rather than parental pressure.

Caldwell and his associates have questioned whether changes in traditional marriage customs which favoured low age at marriage in pre-transitional societies did in fact reflect a desire to limit fertility. A reduction in parental pressure for early marriages may occur without any specific concern, on the part of the elders as well as of the young couple, to limit marital

fertility (Caldwell et al. 1989). Intensive study of Sri Lanka's long-term increase in age at marriage leads them to conclude that this trend was a response to population pressure independent from any conscious effort to reduce the number of births. Yet this reasoning does not preclude the possibility that the decline in arranged marriages, and the growing ideal of romantic love, facilitated the emergence of attitudes favouring smaller family size.

Early marriages in many pre-transitional, patriarchal societies result from parental arrangements designed to forestall unsuitable unions. Matches are often made well before marriage can in fact be consummated. Women marrying young, without having any choice about timing or selection of a partner, are placed in an extremely subordinate position within the new couple mainly when married out of their communities and to men considerably older than themselves. However, arranged marriages, large age differences and a concern about virginity are not universal among pre-transitional societies (Murdock 1964; Schneider 1971; Schlegel 1991). In many cultures the pressure for early marriage results from the relevance of marital status for adulthood and full recognition in the community, rather than from the weight of patriarchy. Endogamic rules and bilateral kinship strengthen women's relative status within the couple even when married at young ages, providing them with continuous access to resources from their family group. Patriarchy is by no means a constant feature of pre-transitional societies. Yet, even in those societies, changing marriage patterns — including the emergence of courtship, prolonged spinsterhood, the ideal of romantic love within the couple replacing kinship pressures and economic ties — have consequences for gender roles within the family and thus might well affect fertility behaviour within marriages.

The broader relevance of marriage customs for the fertility transition becomes clearer when relations between generations and those between genders are considered separately. The concept of patriarchy, often used in explaining the desire for large families in traditional societies, does not distinguish clearly between these two types of relationship (Folbr., 1983). When older males control household decision-making processes towards achieving their own goals, which tend to coincide with uncontrolled fertility and parental choice of marriage partners among the young, females, who might otherwise develop an interest in limiting pregnancies or childbearing, have no power to express this interest. The transition in the demographic decision-making process, from the extended to the conjugal household, might in fact be initiated by changes in marriage customs: nuclearization implies a greater autonomy of the young couple from parental concerns. Also, it may lead to more egalitarian gender roles, thus allowing women to forestall extended kin pressure and obtain spouses' response to their own sexual and procreative demands (Caldwell 1976, 1978; Cain 1982). As Giddens suggests, 'the spread of ideals of romantic love was one factor tending to disentangle the marital bond from wider kinship ties and give it an especial significance' (Giddens 1992:26). Although romantic attachment is no guarantee for female sexual autonomy, it certainly favours more equilibrated gender-based power within marriage.

Increased female autonomy and a growing sense of individuality are relevant for fertility control, since women, rather than men, may initially develop the motivation to limit family size (Seccombe 1992, 1993). Historians have argued that women's unwanted pregnancies, and greater sexual freedom, resulted in the growth in child abandonment (Kertzer 1993) and in the widespread use of abortion (McLaren 1990), during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Birth control techniques which became increasingly used within marriage, such as *coitus interruptus* and condoms, although male-dependent, involved a degree of communication and co-operation within the couple which probably was absent in strongly patriarchal family systems (Brodie 1994). Thus, increasing female autonomy and women's greater control over their bodies, including their sexual lives, may be preconditions for the widespread acceptance of birth control.

This paper deals with changing marriage customs in a pre-transitional setting where the traditional family structure does not show strong patriarchal features: nuclear households and relatively high female status have been predominant in the Andean culture since pre-colonial days. Early marriages traditionally reflect the relevance of marital status for adulthood in a peasant society where women's work is highly valued and complementary gender roles are the ideal. Two communities are compared as to the changes in marriage customs within the same cultural tradition. In one of them, a specialized agricultural economy which limits the autonomous contributions of women, and the relatively abundant supply of arable land, have sustained early marriages with few changes in gender relations within the couple. In the other, economic diversification and tertiarization of the economy as well as the emergence of a youth culture are producing a revolution in marriage patterns, increasing female autonomy and setting the stage for a growing demand for birth control among younger couples.

### **Gender roles and female autonomy: the Andean case**

Much of the demographic work about the onset of fertility decline in traditional societies has focused upon family systems characterized by the predominance of the patriarchal peasant family, based on unilineal descent groupings. The worldwide ethnographic sample studied by Michaelson and Goldschmidt (1971) showed the quantitative predominance of such a pattern, but also the wide variation within the model itself. Historical studies of the development of mediaeval household patterns in Europe also indicated time variations in patriarchy: agnatic inheritance systems favouring the male line, associated with an emphasis upon female chastity and monogamy, replaced cognatic households predominant among elite families in the early Middle Ages (Herlihy 1985). Patriarchal control over children, as described by authors such as Stone (1977) among the English landowning class, might have been considerably less prevalent among families of lower status.

The Andean world has been characterized by complementary gender roles in productive activities, the high value placed upon women's contributions to the household economy, and relatively high female autonomy. The persistence of these traits within the household and the pervasive presence of women in crafts, trade, and services, in spite of the patriarchal nature of Spanish colonial domination, has often been noted. The long colonial exploitation of Indian labour did weaken the status of women within the domestic economy, but it did not seclude them from production. Extensive ethnographic study of an Aymara-speaking peasant society in Bolivia, for instance, led Harris to conclude that '...if there are elements in social relations among the Laymi which may be considered patriarchal, they are not primarily placed within the domestic unit' (Harris 1985:30). According to Harris, the crucial idea to understand the symbolic world of the Laymi is *chachawarmi*, the couple as a unity, consisting of the words for man or husband (*chacha*) and woman or wife (*warmi*). Rituals involve the presence of *chachawarmi*: couples are always together in ceremonies — status is conferred on both married man and woman — while single people must be accompanied by somebody from the other sex. The same concept is echoed in the organization of the household as a social and economic unit, with each couple having a unique set of kin relations with other units. As an economic unit, man and woman are expected to work together since the absence of either one of them is believed to bring bad luck.

Mallon (1987) describes well the prevalence of relative female autonomy among various social strata in the central highlands of Peru at the turn of the nineteenth century. Within the elite class, for instance, she finds that partible inheritance created many substantial female property holders, whose dowry remained legally theirs after marriage. Women often controlled, managed, and operated very large *haciendas* and commercial properties. Among the town middle sectors, women were also important, engaging in tasks such as labour management, moneylending, and of course trade. In the villages, smallholder peasants,

normally engaged in diversified agricultural and non-agricultural activities, also showed similar patterns of division of labour along gender lines which allowed for a variety of income-earning activities by females. Both younger and older women monopolized activities in local and regional markets, within a broader patriarchal political and economic system at a national level.

Female autonomy within peasant villages and Indian corporate communities is promoted by the practice of endogamy as well as by partible inheritance, including anticipatory forms, which allow females access to parents' land after marriage. Extensive systems of reciprocity based upon kinship are also bilateral. Some degree of virilocality is typically present, with newly formed couples normally moving on a temporary basis to the groom's household until a new one is established, but exceptions in the opposite direction are abundant. The ideal of nuclear household independence is actively sought and achieved with the help of both families involved, as well as of fictive kin (*compadres*). Women bring both property and support, as well as a set of duties, to the new household, almost always located not far away from either of the two families of origin. The ideal of independence, however, is closely tied to the ideal of an egalitarian contribution of both family lines to the new household.

Nuclear family independence does not entail a break with extended kin-based systems of exchange. Individuals in the Andean culture are involved in a complex set of rights and obligations within very wide, bilateral kinship networks, which marriages reinforce (Lambert 1980). Fictive kinship (*compadrazgo*) is also produced through marriages and births. Nuclear families are tied in extensive networks composed by bilateral kindred groupings (often called *ayllus*). Although nuclear families are the basic units for the administration of property and economic decision-making processes, households are usually involved in wider exchange systems of a reciprocal nature. In recent years, however, prolonged spinsterhood and late marriages increased the tendency towards nuclearization, promoted further independence within the married couple, and set the stage for female autonomy to be expressed regarding childbearing and childraising.

### **The setting: two rural areas in the Bolivian Andes**

In the mid-1980s we conducted a study of two rural areas in Bolivia<sup>1</sup>. One of them, Ucureña, is a locality in the irrigated valleys of Cochabamba where population has tended to cluster in nucleated villages. The population is closely connected to local and regional markets, but has kept both a land-based economy and a peasant identity in spite of increasing economic diversification and tertiarization of activities. The community of slightly over 4,000 people spreads today around the major road leading to the city of Cochabamba, two hours away by bus. The population is bilingual in Spanish and Quechua, although the latter is the preferred language at home and often the only one handled fluently by women. Ucureña was the site of the first experiments in rural education in Bolivia begun in the late 1930s, and most boys were already attending school for at least a few years in the 1940s. Basic literacy is thus common among men, but less so among women. The latter have started to attend school on a regular basis only in the last few decades: one out of six women over 30 had completed primary school, but already one-half of younger women did so. Their mothers had been, in most cases, illiterate and monolingual.

Our data for Ucureña are based upon a sample 103 households where we conducted extensive interviews with men and women about marriage processes, household formation,

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<sup>1</sup>The study, conducted by Jorge Dandler and myself, was supported by an award under the Population Council's International Research Awards Program on the Determinants of Fertility (Balán and Dandler 1986). See also Dandler and Medeiros 1988; Balán 1995.

and fertility. Interviews with young, unmarried males and females, as well as participant observation of marriage ceremonies, provided supplementary information. We also obtained detailed data on income generating activities by sex and age. People from Ucureña have settled in the city of Cochabamba, in the nearby lowland areas, and in Argentina. Further interviews were conducted in these sites. More young men than women leave for migrant labour in Argentina, the favourite site to accumulate resources in order to marry and form a new family, while migration to the other two destinations has a more balanced sex ratio.

The other rural area is located in the highlands, still poorly connected with the city of Cochabamba and far away from any important urban centre. Its economy is entirely based upon a specialized potato agriculture, which has increasingly displaced other agricultural activities and animal husbandry, although the peasant ideal is still self-subsistence. Specialization and intensification of land use, rather than diversification, have been the local responses to increasing population pressure upon the land. Land subdivision has also promoted out-migration, largely for coca and other cultivation in the lowlands.

We chose to study two dispersed rural settlements in the district of Ayopaya, with a total population of about 1500 people. These are largely monolingual Quechua communities, although men, and increasingly women too, have a working knowledge of Spanish to handle transactions outside the domestic sphere. Schools were built in each of the two localities in the late 1950s, and offer the first years of primary education. All but a few women over 30 are illiterate, but around one half of the younger ones have learned how to read and write. Literacy among males is considerably more extended, even though few have completed primary education. Except for the teachers in the local schools, who are outsiders, nobody has had any formal post-primary education.

In Ayopaya we interviewed men and women in a sample of 71 households, and also some younger men and women not yet established independently, several unwed mothers still living with their parents, and a few widow heads of households. Also we interviewed migrants from Ayopaya established in the subtropical lowlands, where the population is almost exclusively devoted to agricultural activities. Women's labour is almost entirely circumscribed within the household in domestic activities and around it in taking care of farm animals and otherwise helping their husbands in tending the fields.

The valley peasants, who call themselves *campesinos*, refer rather derogatorily to the highland inhabitants as *laris* or *gente de la estancia*, emphasizing differences in cultural and economic status. Urban dwellers in the nearby town of Cliza, who identify themselves as *vecinos*, derogatorily classify both of the former as *campesinos*; and before the peasant uprisings of the 1940s and agrarian reform of the 1950s they would more often have used the term *indios*. Cliza's urban status is symbolized by the plaza, the church, a town hall, and some density of professionals, like lawyers and doctors. Quechua, which has incorporated in Cochabamba a number of Spanish words, is spoken at home in all three localities, but there are important variations in the extent to which Spanish is also spoken, as well as in the mixture of Quechua words within it.

Population growth has resulted in an increased pressure upon limited land resources, but with varying intensity and consequences. The big landed estate which dominated life in Ucureña for almost three centuries, a convent property, was already in a rapid process of subdivision and decentralization by the turn of the century (Dandler 1969). Many sectors were sold or rented to smaller landholders who lived in the city. Smallholders had also been able to purchase family plots. Peasant mobilization in the 1940s was organized to obtain purchase rights over land cultivated under agreements with large tenants. In the valley, density was already felt by the time of the agrarian reform, the growth of non-agricultural activities (trade, crafts, and migrant labour) being organized within the boundaries of a peasant economy.

Tertiarization and the growth of a cash economy both favoured peasant mobilization and were fostered later on by agrarian reform.

In the highlands the picture was almost the opposite: labour, rather than land, was scarce. Large *haciendas* concentrated land, there were almost no independent peasant cultivators before the reform, and a crude system of labour exploitation reflected the difficulties *hacendados* faced to recruit and retain labourers. The *hacienda* land was distributed among tenants in the 1950s, with beneficiaries receiving large family plots. Population growth rates have accelerated in the last two decades, and the pressure upon the land was met by more intense potato cultivation (which is affecting land quality) and out-migration.

In spite of these many differences, at the time of our fieldwork the two settings could be largely described as 'pre-transitional'. The major difference between them is found in mean age at marriage (indicated here by cohabitation): in Ucureña females start marital life on the average three and one-half years later than in Ayopaya, a difference largely explained by the increase observed in recent decades. Also, celibacy after age 40 is non-existent in Ayopaya but relatively significant in Ucureña, around ten per cent. Marital fertility is high in both communities: the mean number of births of ever-married women in the older cohorts is 6.8 in both places.

We found, however, clear signs of change in Ucureña. Women often expressed a desire not to be burdened with children, and gave indications of an interest in birth control. Such a desire reflected both their many occupations outside of home, for which childraising was a definite handicap, and a desire for a changed lifestyle for them and their children. Some 40 per cent of the females said 'I'm careful', or 'we are careful' (*me cuido, nos cuidamos*), largely meaning temporary abstinence. Only a few women in the sample admitted to the current use of contraceptives, while others reported past use, mainly those who had spent some time in Argentina. Local nurses and doctors indicate that many women request contraceptives, mainly injectables, about which they learned in Cochabamba or in Buenos Aires, but did not want their husbands or other people to know. Men's attitudes were different: only a small minority said they 'were careful', even though many expressed a concern about the economic crisis and land shortages making it difficult to support many children. More men than women referred to 'God's will', and mostly recognized abstinence as the only, but very unlikely, solution. Neither men nor women in Ayopaya expressed an awareness of birth control as a possible practice within marriage, although everybody had heard or knew about abortive practices and the possible use of folk medicine and ritual to either increase fertility or avoid pregnancy.

The local supply of contraceptives was strictly limited in Ucureña, with no family planning clinics or services available. Services are more abundant in the nearby city, but they are largely private-sector and receive no promotion nor subsidies. Birth control was not openly discussed in the community and there was no information in the media (television was becoming widely available). The Bolivian official policy was, and still is, largely pronatalist, or at least against family planning. Abortion was a strictly taboo topic in public: the belief that natural disasters may be caused by the souls of unborn, unbaptized children was widespread. Yet young women in Ucureña are known to resort increasingly to abortion, which although illegal is becoming increasingly available in Cochabamba. Even in Ayopaya while doing our fieldwork we heard rumours about several recent suspected cases of abortion, carried out outside the community.

Young women in Ucureña were at that time showing clear signs of changing attitudes and behaviour. With delayed age at marriage and probably earlier menarche, they faced many fertile years before starting regular marital life. Since sexual experimentation was and still is quite common, one would expect a sharp increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancies. However, such was not the case at the time of our fieldwork. Many young couples expressed a desire to

limit family size, although the ideal is still relatively high. Exploration of this topic proved to be particularly difficult. Our suspicion that abortion was becoming more widespread could not be substantiated further than the reports obtained from medical personnel and teachers.

### **Marriage customs in the Andes**

Andean anthropologists have discussed marriage customs in the region for some time (Mayer and Bolton 1980). The debate originated in observations dating from the first years of the Spanish conquest which suggested the existence of a 'trial marriage', a period of marital life with limited commitments accepted by the community (Price 1965; Carter 1980). Chroniclers at the time of conquest and other visitors observed the relative indifference of Indians regarding virginity. Premarital sexual experimentation and extended periods of cohabitation before marriage were seemingly very common. Although the idea of a 'trial marriage' has now been discarded, it is clear that marriage in the Andes is to be seen as a process rather than as a single event, the main features of which survived the many efforts from Spanish colonizers to impose Catholic rituals.

The overall framework of the marriage process emphasizes, on one hand, kinship rights and duties involving the two family lines, and on the other, the socialization of bride and groom within the couple. Customs of indigenous origin, certainly changed over time, include a series of ceremonies which symbolize the transition of the new couple into full community membership and an independent status. The ceremonies emphasize patterns of reciprocity and exchange to be found within the *ayllu* or ethnic group since pre-Columbian times.

The Catholic ceremony, involving the presence of a priest, has been widely adopted as the last stage in the marriage process. In the past, Catholic ceremonies in the countryside were often sponsored by landowners and authorities during special occasions to regularize the situation of couples living together. They were infrequent, collective ceremonies, which gave legal recognition to ties which were well rooted in local custom. In recent decades the national state and civil laws, which have entered the countryside only during the last 50 years, replaced the Church in this role, even if the Catholic ritual is also kept in most cases. Today civil marriage has become very widespread as the most accepted sign of legitimacy and carries greater legal consequences in case of property disputes. It also became an indication of respectability and was incorporated as a ritual mandatory for entry into full adult status within the community.

These different but overlapping traditions combine to produce a series of rituals which mark stages in marital tie formation (Bolton 1980; Collins 1983). Three stages have been distinguished (Carter 1980). The first one is defined by the recognition and acceptance of the new tie by both families involved and relates to the ritual of petition, which ends with the bride moving to live together with the groom, usually at the latter's household. The civil marriage ceremony follows at some later occasion, which in recent times has been reduced to weeks or days but in the past may have taken years after cohabitation started. The second stage involves service relations between the couple and the parents' household, where the couple lives. During this stage, the couple is supposed to accumulate goods and experience enough to become independent, and receives training from the parents. The ideal of 'service' — leading at times to a rather crude exploitation of the youngsters' labour, mainly that of the young bride, before a new household is constituted — combines reciprocity with socialization and learning. The couple slowly adjusts to marital life, develops autonomy, and gains status within the community. The third stage involves a religious ceremony, moving to a new house, and is often crowned in its completion by re-thatching the roof (Gose 1991).

Although separation is easier at the early stages of the marriage process, it is by no means frequent. Price (1965) estimated that only one in six couples who initiated cohabitation ended in separation before the religious ceremony. Separation is also possible afterwards. Land

property received as anticipatory inheritance remains individual, so that after separation it reverts to the side where it came from. Remarriage after separation or widowhood, with or without children, is also common among men as well as women.

Marriage ties develop through a series of rituals which reinforce the agreement within the couple as well as the set of reciprocal duties with both family lines. From a strictly demographic point of view, however, it is important to notice that cohabitation starts immediately after the first petition ceremony. Very often it is initiated a few days earlier since, as will be described more carefully in this paper, the marriage process is often started by elopement, sometimes called *rapto* (kidnap) or *robo* (stealing): the young man arranges to take his bride forcefully away from her family, usually with her consent, sleeping together for one or more nights. *Robo* shows his willingness, and ability, to start marital life. If successful, it initiates a series of negotiations rapidly leading to cohabitation, often within the groom's parents' household. Occasional sex may precede elopement, or take place without any long-term consequences if pregnancy does not occur.

## Changing marriage customs<sup>2</sup>

### *The persistence of early marriage in the highlands*

Older men and women in the highlands of Ayopaya associate the past with the times of the *hacienda*. They remember the last days of the *hacienda* rule, already challenged by strong peasant uprisings in the 1940s, an important antecedent of the revolution which led to the agrarian reform of 1953 (Dandler and Torrico 1985). The two localities studied are typical ex-*haciendas*; in fact, in one of them the most important *vecino* is still the old administrator. The *hacienda* property before the reform was divided between a centrally organized sector under the direct control of the administration, and decentralized activities carried out by peasant holders under various forms of rent tenancy. Heads of households, largely males, were the link recognized by the *hacendado* between the two systems. Land plots were allocated to family units through the head, who was responsible for labour services to be paid to the *hacendado*. Family, rather than individual, labour was exchanged for land, with different obligations assigned to family members according to sex and age status.

The labour system did little to reinforce parental authority since the *hacienda* exercised considerable control over the whole family. Married males would be absent several days a week, unless they were able to send older children (or paid workers, if rich enough) to pay their dues. Married females were exclusively involved in domestic and productive work within the household-controlled economy. In fact, freed from duties with the *hacienda*, women had a crucial role in handling the domestic economy due to the continuous absence of their husbands.

Single females, young or old, as well as widows, were an important source of labour: they were in charge of domestic tasks and took care of the animals. These women, especially the younger ones, were subject to the direct authority of the administration, who would hold their parents responsible for their misbehaviour. *Mitanis*, as they were called, were often subject to sexual abuses by *hacienda* owners and administrators. In the 1940s, when the peasantry revolted, many of these families went to court complaining about such abuses, and the women's testimonies in such trials offer a rich source of data on these matters.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this section, the present tense is used to describe marriage customs studied through interviews and direct observation during 1984-6, while later visits served to confirm trends such as increasing acceptance of open courtship and shortened cohabitation periods before formal marriage.

The agrarian reform in the 1950s radically changed power structure and labour use in Ayopaya. Land redistribution increased family welfare but favoured men more than women. Male heads of households took control over their own labour. Their wives' lives changed considerably less, since they had not been working for the *hacienda*. Young females now stay at home, while young males do not have to work replacing adults. Young men feel an added incentive to marry young and obtain independence, while young women have a rather diminished position within the parental household. Young women's autonomous contributions to paternal family income in a specialized agricultural economy are not very large, although women do assume a number of productive responsibilities on top of their domestic chores. Their presence, however, becomes crucial for a new household to be formed, since it is unthinkable for a man to attain independence and cultivate the land without a woman and family of his own.

Before the revolution, parental permission, and above it the word of the *patron* — who was actually referred to as *tatay* or 'my father' — was required for a couple to start living together and form a new household. This requirement was mandatory when the young woman was a *mitani* and when either the bride or the groom were orphans. The *patron* had considerable power to arrange marriages, and often used this power to enlarge his labour supply. Tenancy rights, which could occasionally be given also to women but necessarily involved the work of men, were used for this purpose. Quite a few landless outsiders, sponsored by the *hacienda*, married local young women and settled in Ayopaya, but not even one young woman was brought by marriage from outside the district's villages. All women eventually married, and remarriage of widows was very common. Early marriages were the common rule: around 60 per cent of females interviewed were living with a man by age 18, while their mates were only one or two years older. Then, as now, military service at age 18 was the recognized condition for men to start looking for a woman to marry.

Arranged marriages, with the partial exception of *hacienda*-sponsored unions, were not the rule in the 1940s, when our older informants were youngsters, although parents would often actively intervene on their own, and most certainly upon the request of a marriageable son. Young men could not gain economic independence or become full, adult members of the community without getting married. Two major changes were introduced simultaneously by agrarian reform. On one hand, there was no longer an *hacendado* whose authority had to be respected, nor labour service which took the youngsters away from home and made the prospects of starting a new household largely dependent upon the *hacendado's* willingness to provide access to a plot of land. On the other hand, land reverted to the peasant households in the names of heads of households, normally identified as males by the law.

The traditional systems of bilateral, anticipated inheritance helped to preserve the possibility of early marriage even when land subdivision followed. Marriages combined, through the addition of the individual components, land plots subdivided through partible inheritance. The rising number of surviving children, however, resulted in a process of continuous subdivision (and dispersion) which could not be restrained through marriages.

Courtship patterns have changed very little in Ayopaya since the 1940s. Even during the *hacienda* days, in most cases young boys and girls started courtship on their own, usually in secrecy, and within the framework of a very restricted public life. Distance from the house was required for unsupervised encounters, which took place either while herding animals in pastures located at higher altitudes, or when labour duties took young men and women away from the household for several days in a row. Religious *fiestas* were also favourable for such encounters, including in this case the presence of outsiders from nearby villages who would at times marry girls within the village. Open courtship was, and still is, very restricted, since affection, even among married couples, is never shown in public. Young men with an interest in starting a relationship show it through eye contact and conversation. As in other Andean

communities, visual communication with the use of mirrors, reflecting sunlight in the appropriate direction in the open fields — i.e., while tending animals — is a common practice. The spoken word in itself, when generating an appropriate response, may be taken as an expression of affection and the beginning of a possible relationship. A young man starts the conversation while the young woman has the option of turning him down by rejecting the dialogue. A persistent dialogue is by itself a sign of affection, and an eventual interest in getting together, even if her words apparently mean rejection or lack of interest. Actual rejection is expressed by avoidance and non-response. Once mutual interest is established, the young man talks to his parents who, if approving, offer themselves as mediators to talk with her parents. Courtship tends to be very short, from a few days or weeks to perhaps a year, but never longer since there is no way to legitimize an attachment while keeping it secret.

Older men report that premarital sexual experimentation was quite common. Older women, however, seldom recognize having had sexual intercourse with other men before marriage, except in the context of unions started and broken down. Elopement, in the form of *robo* or 'stealing a woman', was known but hardly common. A couple would resort to this practice only under special circumstances, forcing the girl's family to accept the marriage. Elopement was particularly disapproved when the man was alone or when the girl was a *mitani*: the offender usually temporarily left the village, but still faced punishment upon his return. His parents would be punished if the offender did not show up.

If successful and approved, courtship leads to a period of cohabitation, normally at the boy's parents' household, until a formal marriage is arranged. Parental approval is still necessary since the couple cannot establish a new household without such support. In the past, the *hacendado* or administrator also had to be consulted, since the young man would aspire to join his father in renting land from the *hacienda*, or eventually rent some on his own. Parental agreement allows the couple to start living together almost immediately, as soon as the young woman's parents have given approval under 'trusted word' (*por palabra*), a formal commitment to get married. The petitioning ceremony, which is called *manaqa*, is a rather simple one, with little festivity and no further exchanges of gifts or property. The female's family acceptance is obtained relatively easily in Ayopaya. Reciprocal labour exchanges based upon kin have limited application in a specialized agricultural community such as Ayopaya, and thus family alliances through ceremonies and rituals do not have great importance in this community.

From the petitioning ceremony on, a rather prolonged period of *convivencia* or 'living together' normally starts. The ideal is to shorten this period as much as possible, but the growing difficulties in getting established locally have led to more extended periods under this system. The incoming member of the couple, normally the female, 'pays service' in exchange for help in preparing a new household. The young woman is taught by her mother-in-law what she needs to know in order to keep a house on her own, while the couple learns to live together. Although the system often leads to the exploitation of the incoming female, it is possible for her to go back, although at the cost of losing face. Separation during this period, although not common, is much easier than later on, when children had already been born.

Migrant workers who settle as coca cultivators in the lowlands also require a family, and most young men return home in order to look for a wife. Courtship, elopement, and marriage become tied to this migration process and seriously shorten the marriage process and undermine the custom of cohabitation within the paternal household. Migration serves to maintain low age at marriage and high nuptiality rates.

A formal religious ceremony is held when the couple is already independent, has established a new household, and often has had one or more children. Civil marriage ceremonies, practically unknown until the revolution, have recently achieved social weight but are not yet mandatory, as is the case in the valley. For all practical purposes, rights and

obligations within the couple, and between the couple and both sets of parents, have already started and are effective during this period of *convivencia*. This marriage ceremony, in the rather austere environment of an agricultural community, is often short and does not entail large expenditures.

The prevailing image of the marriage process in Ayopaya today stresses the needs of a young man for a wife, both sexually and in order to become independent and start a new household. It is supposedly up to him to first find the appropriate consenting girl, then to convince his parents of the legitimacy of his desire, and for the latter to humbly request another family to give their daughter as a wife. Land availability is by far the major restriction. A major asset of a young woman for marriage is her expected land inheritance, which she will bring to the new household even if kept under her property. Her needs receive little attention: it is supposed to be natural for a young woman to get married and leave her parental household, while her parents' concern is mainly that she will be well treated, that she will not marry a lazy man or one with no property.

Parental opposition from either side is uncommon in Ayopaya today. Courtship activities are simply ignored: neither the young man nor the woman will tell their parents about what is going on until they are ready to elope or to start living together. The woman's parents seldom exercise strict control. Young women go about their normal activities unsupervised, although since in Ayopaya they do not engage in trade, only tending animals takes them far away from home. Yet young men and women are not to be seen together in public, since once a relationship is out in the open the pressure mounts to start the marriage process. The extension of schooling for both boys and girls is starting to change this picture somewhat, but only primary school facilities are locally available.

Elopement, a show of force as well as resourcefulness on the part of the young man, is not a very common event in Ayopaya. When it does occur, it takes place with the man's parents' approval, since in most cases the young couple will hide at their home for the night. Parental reaction to elopement on the girl's side is normally mild in Ayopaya. There are very few cases when parents go out of their way to bring the girl back home. The main reasons for a woman's family to reject a possible marriage are age and locality. Somebody who is too young will not be taken seriously, and families will normally reject marriage with an outsider if this implies the daughter will be taken far away. There is, however, considerably more specification about who might be a good mate for a young man, largely in economic terms. The chosen woman must be hardworking, and having some land is definitely an asset. People in Ayopaya believe today, as they believed in the past, that the normal adult man needs a wife. He needs her as much for sexual satisfaction as for maintaining an independent household. She complements the man's productive activities and works side-by-side with him in cultivation. But she is irreplaceable within the household, and no man may pretend to have an independent life without a wife to cook for him and have a place ready for rest. The value of a woman's work is considerably higher as a wife than as a daughter. Parents do not expect to gain much from the daughter's marriage, since family alliances are of little use in Ayopaya.

#### ***Delayed marriages in the valley communities***

In Ucureña, *hacienda* rule was markedly different from that in Ayopaya since peasants had increasingly obtained autonomy through land purchases, establishing themselves as *piqueros* or small landholders. Land, rather than labour, was already in short supply. Labour systems were extremely complex, with many different customary arrangements, all less coercive than in the highlands. Ucureña was a much more stratified community than Ayopaya, with many gradations of wealth, landed and otherwise, and a wider variety of sources of income.

A longer history of miscegenation and acculturation also resulted in cultural bilingualism, a widespread cash economy, and greater economic diversification and autonomy of the

peasant households as compared with the highlands. Parental authority and control over the young predominated over that of the landowners and administrators, who had less interest and authority in arranging marriages to suit their needs for labour. National institutions, represented by civil authorities, a few schools, the military, and local political brokers since the late nineteenth century, were offsetting the monopolistic power *haciendas* enjoyed in more isolated regions. Last, but not least, the major absentee landowner in Ucureña was a convent, which as a corporate body had greater restrictions than individuals in handling its property.

In Ucureña civil marriage and the public offices dispensing them were established before the 1952 revolution, displacing the religious ceremony in its legal functions but certainly not in some of its social functions. The civil ceremony became prevalent as an important step for citizenship and legal rights: the marriage certificate became relevant for inheritance, to legitimize children's status, and even for school attendance. Civil marriage became part of a changing identity, the growing sense and pride in national citizenship, as well as of belonging to the peasant community represented by a union or *sindicato*. Religious marriage, however, has continued to be regarded as the final legitimation of a couple and of its acceptance in the community, normally years after the couple has established economic independence, has had one or more children, and can afford the sizeable expense of such a ceremony.

As civil marriage, a rather simple ceremony, became easily available and customary after the revolution, *convivencia* or cohabitation became increasingly unacceptable. The woman's parents normally make the marriage certificate a condition for accepting the new couple living together. The certificate becomes the guarantee to protect the woman's rights, while for the community as a whole it marks the distinction from the highland 'Indians' or *laris*. Cohabitation is possible only when the couple settles out of the community. Married couples seldom spend more than a few weeks or months at the parents' household, and normally expect to have a house of their own. This pattern certainly approaches the urban ideal of middle-class respectability developed in most Western societies. The major difference is introduced by the reluctant recognition of open courtship and, more strikingly, by the persistence of *robo* as the expected means of initiation of the marriage process. Thus, the following description of the marriage process in Ucureña will emphasize changes in the courtship process and the role of elopement, or stealing a bride.

Non-agricultural activities, largely dominated by women in rural Ucureña, always provided a setting for encounters between young men and women. A typical case was *muqueo*, the gathering of young women, generally in the evening, for fermenting maize beer or *chicha*. This was a common domestic economic activity undertaken by women in *ayni* or reciprocal labour, rotating from one house to another in preparation for a religious festivity, or a family ceremony, or to generate a cash income. Young men, generally as a group, would also attend to help and meet girls. Young women were also sent to various workshops of friends or relatives as apprentices, to learn a craft or trade like sewing, weaving, hat or soap making. After the agrarian reform the system of local weekly markets developed a consistent flow of traders, normally women, between localities; young girls usually accompanied their mothers or other female relatives. Markets provide many chances for courtship and unsupervised encounters. They are also places where drinking and a festive environment develop easily, settings associated with courtship and very often elopement.

Until recently it was not acceptable for young women to be seen in the streets of Ucureña with young men alone. Unsupervised encounters among the young had to take place in hiding or outside the community, and home visits, except in groups and around some task, were ruled out. In fact, there was no external recognition of a courtship relation within the young woman's household. A girl or young woman would be scolded, or even punished, if it was known that she had a *novio* or boyfriend, and this might lead to greater supervision, if not

seclusion. Thus, individual encounters had to be clandestine. Surreptitious dating situations, called *pololeos* or *enamoramientos*, generally took place in the open fields or during market activities outside of Ucureña.

Market activities are only one among many institutionalized settings allowing for encounters today. Increasing school enrolments by girls, now often through their teens, allow the more common grounds for new relationships among youngsters. Dancing, the growth of secular *fiestas*, and sporting events are key modern features of contemporary life in Ucureña. Parents are still supposed to be strict with girls, and insistent upon narrowly controlling their lives. Although the norms are increasingly difficult to enforce, courtship is not yet formalized and is still conducted in relative secrecy from parents: *novios* are either pressed to go ahead and marry, or forbidden, with no visiting rights granted without a commitment for imminent marriage. The issue is not virginity, which plays no role in any discussion on courtship and marriage, but rather the unacceptable ambiguity over who is in control of the girl's behaviour: the father or the (expected) husband.

The practice of 'stealing' a young woman (*robo*) still holds today as the preferred mechanism to open up a clandestine relationship and announce publicly the interest in getting married. Although open encounters are becoming the rule among the young —there are modern dances, public drinking places, and many festivities, in addition to the regular weekly markets — *robo* is still the means to announce marriage intentions. Almost all couples interviewed started the marriage process with an elopement (previously arranged stealing of the bride), and one third of them eloped twice or three times owing to parental opposition. Elopement is common even among better educated couples with professional expectations. A young man is expected to 'steal' the woman in order to deserve her. Otherwise, he is blamed for lack of courage or taken to be not interested enough in her.

The burden of the elopement process is on the male: it is he who is responsible for making the arrangements necessary for the occasion, including finding a cover for one or more nights, generally with a trusted relative, and obtaining the support of his parents to initiate the petitioning process. But it is also he who will face the shame of a possible rejection on the part of the young woman's parents. Of course, a young woman who 'lets herself be stolen' by somebody who does not pursue the marriage process, or who becomes unacceptable, will also face undesirable consequences. She will certainly gain a bad reputation, mainly if this happens to her more than once. Her responsibility is to be stolen by the right candidate, but it is the young man who has to show that he is serious and that his intended wife is valuable by stealing her from her family.

*Robos* thus take place with the agreement of the young woman, but agreement is surrounded by ambiguity. A decision to elope might be carried out after considerable drinking, and the woman may report that she did not know what she was doing, or that she was taken under some false pretence. However, there are relatively few cases of *robo* without the intention of getting married, even if there is no major penalty to the young man if he does not follow the expected procedure afterwards: relations between the families involved may be strained, but there is seldom an attempt on either part to force a marriage against the participants' will even if pregnancy results. A pregnant daughter and single mother, although at times severely punished, will be accepted back home with no permanent damage. Failed elopement may be followed by a second, or even a third attempt later on: insistence in the face of opposition may be needed when the latter is in fact strong, generally because of striking inequality between the families. Failed elopements with no follow-up, generally caused by considerations of age, bring different but unpleasant consequences: the boy loses face and is often tempted to leave the community, perhaps in order to gain resources and experience needed for a marriage. The girl may face a beating, greater control, and heavier duties. Pregnancy may, or may not, change the outcome: at times pregnancy leads to a greater chance

of marriage, but often parents will prefer a single mother at home to what they consider a bad marriage.

The morning following the *robo* the young man arranges for his parents to learn explicitly of his decision, about which very often he has not consulted in advance. The young man, however, needs their approval: his parents have to be involved in the petitioning process. They first go to ask the young woman if she accepts the union, before paying a visit to her parents asking for her to be married to their son. They have to make sure of her acceptance in order not to lose face in the following step. The girl's parents will almost necessarily show indignation and opposition to the marriage. They may attempt to bring her back home, refusing to meet the boy's parents or special envoy. Refusals are not uncommon, while the young man may insist, first by humbly asking forgiveness for having taken the young woman away. But if his and his parents' efforts fail, he may insist by eloping again at a later occasion.

Parental objections on his or her side are quite usual and often result in marriage delays or a broken relationship. Age and relative wealth, on both sides, are recurrent themes. Males did not make acceptable marriage partners until they were 18, and are now normally required to be considerably older. Women's lower age at marriage has swiftly moved from 16 years to 18, but the median age is considerably higher, over 22 among currently married women below 40 years of age. When the young man is more educated or has middle-class aspirations, his parents will strenuously object to his marrying down, and vice versa. Opposition, however, is raised also for the opposite reasons: if he is from a richer or more educated family, her parents may oppose the marriage under the suspicion that she will not be properly treated or respected. Families prefer level marriages because they expect to reinforce reciprocal relations with each other, and know that reciprocity within a hierarchical context entails a very different pattern of obligations. Although reciprocity arrangements are established in a variety of ways, kinship provides the most 'natural' setting, and kinship established through marriage adds the most significant possible bonds to establish reciprocal service arrangements.

Successful elopement leads to a rather elaborate procedure of *pedido de mano* in which his side asks her side to let the young woman leave the parental household by showing deference and providing food and drink for the occasion. The petitioning ceremony in Ucupeña is an occasion for prolonged drinking and eating, involving large numbers of relatives, friends, and neighbours. It is the first setting to test if families are in fact compatible. His side provides the amenities, but then has to provide the new couple with a room (often the best one) until they build, with both families' help, a new house. The two sides are supposed to provide equivalent contributions to the new couple. At the time of formal marriage families compete in showing how much they give the new couple, but the ideal sustained, in the past and today, is of a carefully balanced arrangement in which each side provides an equivalent part of the dowry.

Other than age and social status, personal characteristics are also relevant. Previous marriages or children, on either side, are always a handicap. 'Bad reputation', in the case of women, is also relevant. But a key factor is industriousness: men have to be able to show they can support a family, women that they are not lazy and know how to work, at home and in other activities. The petition ceremony involves long considerations of these personal characteristics. His parents usually argue in his favour, while her parents insist that she is not ready, is too young or inexperienced, but implying that she is perhaps too worthy for the candidate. Then, it continues with the basic arrangements for the following ceremony, civil marriage: a date has to be set, sooner rather than later (by imposition of her parents); whether it is going to be a 'closed' ceremony, held privately, or an 'open' one with many other people invited and entertained; and whether a religious ceremony, with considerable more expense, will take place jointly or not.

Courtship secrecy, the practice of *robo*, and complex negotiations, all serve to indicate the high value of the young woman and the unwillingness of her parents to let her go unless the circumstances are ripe. Looking at these rituals from the young man's point of view, what is required of him is that he actually prove, to the girl and to her parents, that he has the resources to support a new household. This proof became more difficult to pass when both land and jobs for young men grew less and less available, a condition fostering their temporary migration to Argentina or elsewhere. Marriage prospects increasingly depend on the young man's individualized resources and his earning capacity, and less on his family's wealth. His maturity is each time more a precondition for marriage than its consequence.

The greater the value of the young woman's contributions to family income, due to extended diversification of the local economy as well as increasing female education, the higher the price young men had to pay in order to obtain a proper marriage. These trends have had a positive effect in delaying the age at which civil marriages take place in Ucureña, since *convivencia* is unacceptable without this legal procedure.

The ritualization of *robo* shows the increasing importance of violence in establishing male roles in Ucureña. Violence is largely symbolic in this case, since the young woman in most cases is willingly taken, and the violence is directed against her family. Thus, both members of the couple, but mainly the young man, have to beg the family's forgiveness for what they have done. The young man is competing with her father or brothers in establishing control over the young woman by taking her away from them. Such control is established also by the actual use of force. Woman battering is an extended custom throughout the Andean world, extensively reported in the ethnographic literature and a common observation in peasant villages as well as in the cities (Schuler et al. 1994). Our observation is that it is far more common, and dangerous, in valley communities like Ucureña than in the highland ones like Ayopaya. One important difference is probably found in alcoholism, which is much more prevalent in the former communities. Another difference is the increasing autonomy of women in the valley.

A possible interpretation, congruent with our description of *robo* in the context of the marriage process, is that battering becomes more common when the male status within the household is more insecure or has to be established. The underlying fact may often be that the woman is very independent and the husband regrets his diminished status within the household. As a rule, either the father (older brothers in his absence), or the husband, has a 'right' to beat the woman, but not both. When the young woman is single, she is under the supposedly strict supervision of her father, although seldom directly. Young women constantly defy paternal authority through the very nature of their extended activities and are permanently facing the risk of violence. Later on, this supervision is exercised by the husband. The *robo*, as suggested above, shows the young man is ready to take over this control from her father. In the marriage ceremonies it is common that parents will warn their marrying daughters about this fact. After marriage the woman is not supposed to complain about a beating to her relatives. In very dramatic cases of repeated beatings, women will tend to seek the support of the couple's *padrinos* rather than that of her parents, since paternal intervention will assume, or provoke, a separation.

Thus, female autonomy within the household — in a woman's activities, in disposing of her income or wealth, in actually controlling many decisions regarding household consumption and investment — often meets with a violent response, and submission, more often apparent than real, follows. This is a factor which obviously limits the extension of autonomy in sexual matters. An assertive wife insisting upon a limit to her childbearing responsibilities, perhaps suggesting birth control, is an obvious threat to an insecure husband. What we observed is that women claiming an interest in 'being careful' or actually looking for effective contraception seldom expect husbands' co-operation in these matters. Sex and

contraception were not yet open for discussion within most marriages at the time of our fieldwork. Rather, women were often tempted to solve the problem by themselves, or by checking with each other and with outsiders about contraception, as was found in other cultures (Brewer and Perdue 1988). Increasing female autonomy may be more easily shown in behaviour than in open, verbal opposition to males' wishes, real or assumed.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued in favour of paying closer attention to marriage customs, in particular to those elements favouring female autonomy, because of their relevance for fertility decline. Increase in female age at marriage is associated with an extension of spinsterhood, the acceptance of courtship, and a decline in parental influence over the selection of marriage partners. These are processes promoting both nuclearization and an increase in the bargaining power of women within the nuclear family, conditions favourable to the emergence of favourable attitudes towards birth control.

The evidence presented draws upon an ethnographic study of two communities in the Bolivian Andes, a cultural area traditionally characterized by rather weak patriarchal features in spite of the social and economic roles played by kinship-based reciprocal exchange systems. In one of them we found the persistence of early marriages associated with a specialized agricultural economy where women play roles as wives and mothers as well as partners in agricultural production but are not engaged in autonomous income-earning activities. Thus, these women maintain a relatively subordinate, even if highly valued, position within the family. Young men are subject to strong pressures to marry early since they need a wife to become independent producers and members of their communities, while the needs of young women are subordinate to them. Parents normally expect the youngsters to marry early, and help them in doing so, although they do not intervene to arrange marriages.

In the other community, marriages are taking place considerably later largely as a consequence of the increasing individualized capacity of females as income-earners. Parental pressure, when present, is in the direction of delaying rather than anticipating marriages, since they place high value on the young women's contributions to family income. Young men, on the contrary, achieve independence much later today than in the past, and have to show individual resourcefulness in order to find a wife. Spinsterhood is much more prolonged today than a few decades ago, and there are strong pressures to recognize courtship as an open process. In this community we find signs of rapid change in attitudes towards birth control, mainly in the young generation, in spite of a rather hostile environment and the low availability of modern contraception.

The complex nature of the marriage process allows us only to suggest the causal chain leading from social and economic changes to greater individuation of the mate selection process and to more egalitarian gender roles within the family. Unfortunately, there are few intensive studies of marriage processes and the early stages of family formation. Such studies would probably shed considerable light on changing attitudes towards family size among young women and their ability to strengthen their bargaining position in this regard.

A major implication of this discussion for students of the fertility transition is that courtship patterns and marriage delay are important in setting the scene for fertility behaviour within marriage through their influence in female autonomy. The practice of stealing a bride offered us an opportunity to analyse such processes. A woman's autonomy, hidden by apparent passivity during elopement or submission to the husband within marriage, is supported by her increased economic contributions both to the parental home and the new household.

The evidence presented here is very limited, based upon two case studies within a particular cultural context. The Andean culture is atypical within pre-transitional societies in

the extent of female economic and domestic autonomy. This may serve, however, to refine our views about the role of a decline in patriarchal power in the process of fertility transition, given the significant, but often ignored, cross-cultural variability in pre-transitional family structures.

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