Of social construction, politics and biology: population geographies in the Pacific

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Abstract: Sustained challenges by third world, black and feminist scholars have unsettled the established agenda of the social sciences in the 1990s. Unfortunately, population geographies in the Pacific have failed to engage with these debates. By avoiding the metaphysical challenges posed by contemporary theoretical debates, often by people from previously marginalised groups, population geographies have failed to provide the spark necessary for the dynamic expansion of ideas. However, an analysis of population geographies in the Pacific, almost all of which are mobility studies, reveals important contributions for advancing a more critical population geography. This paper begins with a critical review of population geography in general then looks more specifically at population geographies, mostly mobility studies, in the Pacific. It advances the argument that the humanist geographers Chapman and Bonnemaison have made critical contributions in reconceptualising population mobility. Further advances would benefit from an engagement with feminist geography and post-structural discourse analysis.

Keywords: *feminist geography, population geography, Pacific, mobility*

Despite sustained challenges by third world, black and feminist¹ scholars to the established agenda of the social sciences in the 1990s, population geography, along with other sub-disciplines² in geography and elsewhere, has been slow to engage with these debates. I am intrigued by this because although Findlay and Graham (1991) make this point clearly, and are supported by Zelinsky's (1991:9) call to 'reach out ... to the livelier sectors within geography', later authors like Nash (1996, 1994a, 1994b) fail to take up the challenge. Hence, White and Jackson (1995) continue the critique. In addition to persuasive practical arguments, they offer some simple analytical tools for engaging with

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the metaphysical challenges posed by contemporary theoretical debates. I remain unconvinced, however, that such analytical tools, drawn from different theoretical orientations will fare any better than either the theoretical reasoning of Findlay and Graham or Zelinsky's plaintive plea. The reason for my scepticism is that personal politics and values are still considered irrelevant to scholarly debate and as a result an important aspect of research is hidden from discussion. In this paper I draw on Haraway (1992:97) who reassures that 'feminist demands are not to expunge offensive material, but to require precise analysis of how the unmarked categories work – and how we continue to inherit the trouble'. My focus is on population geographies in the Pacific, but, more ambitiously, my intention is to further the emancipatory potential of academic scholarship especially that available to students who begin their studies of geography from knowledge bases different from that which the discipline of geography emerged.

My intention here is to stimulate debate on the extent to which recognising the social construction of demographic events forces a recognition of the intimate relationships between power and knowledge. So that if, for example, in a house-to-house survey, a person reports herself as being the mother of a child conceived by and born to another woman, then the subsequent questions must also include why this woman identifies in this way as well as who the 'natural' mother might be. The politics of who knows what and why can no longer be overlooked because such political naivety in the academy is harder to accept as students and scholars schooled in other ways of knowing find their voices. Pacific playwright and scholar Hereniko writes (1995:11); 'Instead of being defensive, let us talk to each other; instead of an 'us' and 'them' mentality, let us explore the different ways of knowing'. Within contemporary social theory these voices are being heard and my intention here is to show how population geographies in the Pacific have had within them the whispers of this emancipatory scholarship. I extend Hereniko's argument further by suggesting that feminist scholarship within geography³ which works from the basis of challenging all dominant power relations, and not just those based solely on gender, can enlighten population geographies. In particular, scholarship that prompts new understandings of power, knowledge and social relationships between people and places (Longhurst, 1997:486).

This paper begins by briefly reviewing recent critiques of population geography. I then turn to population geographies in the Pacific and look at how humanist geographies moved geography onto more fertile ground. This follows with a discussion of the potential of working from feminist theoretical perspectives which allow for engagement with other critical perspectives, like scholarship on embodied geographies, because as McDowell (1991:124) argues 'understanding diversity requires a deeper commitment to theory'.

RECENT CRITIQUES OF POPULATION GEOGRAPHY

Population geography has been unproblematically defined in the *Dictionary of Human Geography* (3rd edition), as 'the study of the ways in which spatial

variations in the distribution, composition, migration and growth of population are related to the nature of places' (Ogden, 1994:452). This definition clearly marks an interest in the relationship between populations and places. However, instead of widening the scope of population geography, Ogden narrows it by writing that, 'recent years have seen an interest in, for example, regional and national levels of fertility and mortality, detailed patterns of disease diffusion and advanced modelling of interregional population growth' (ibid). The focus on levels, patterns and models of population processes is clearly paramount although Ogden concedes that social theory is also being applied in population studies. Despite this concession, it is this overriding focus of population geography on migration and spatial variation which fails to engage with theoretical developments in other areas of geography as Findlay and Graham (1991) and White and Jackson (1995) clearly show.

In their provocative review, Findlay and Graham (1991) argue that the fatal weakness of population geography as a sub-speciality is the failure of proponents, as academics, to engage with complex epistemological and ontological debates in geography as a discipline, as well as in the wider academy. Instead, they contend that population geography has remained 'sheltered in the narrow bounds of spatial demography' (1991:157). They implore population geographers to forget about being population geographers and to concentrate on being geographers with a holistic perspective so they can engage with wider debates in the discipline as well as the social sciences. Findlay and Graham (1991) acknowledge that the spatio-temporal orientation which has dominated the academy was a strong influence on population geography so, although they do not blame population geographers entirely they take issue with them for failing to explicitly question the basic assumptions underlying their mostly positivist methods. By hanging onto spatial encumbrances Findlay and Graham (1991) argue that, in general, population geographers have failed to be innovative in either substance (for example, addressing population-environment themes) or theory (such as taking structuralist or humanist approaches) and thereby have avoided many difficult topics such as fertility in the third world and the impact of disasters like famines. As I show later these claims do not fit neatly with population geographies in the Pacific as Skeldon (1995) disagreeably notes in response to similar claims by Halfacree and Boyle (1993) about the dearth of biographical approaches in migration research.

Aside from the Skeldon/Halfacree and Boyle discussion, there has been little direct engagement of these critiques, unlike Kearns' discussion of a reformed medical geography (see Kearns, 1993 and 1994; Mayer and Meade, 1994; Dorn and Laws, 1994). Instead, Nash (1994a:84), offers three ways to enhance the failing reputation of population geography; get involved in contemporary policy issues of consequence (e.g. aging and migration), produce quality work and, finally, communicate research results better. Although these are admirable aspirations, the political naivety of this remedy is astounding. Taking the first issue: policy issues are nothing but motivated by the political desires of dominant groups and population research is also subject to, though often

understated, the political and theoretical persuasion of the authors as Hayes has shown clearly in the Pacific for Polynesian migration (Hayes, 1991) and population policy in Papua New Guinea (Hayes, 1993).⁴ Rather than being innovative, Nash's approach supports the contention that as 'reluctant decolonisers' (Findlay and Graham, 1991), population geographers are failing to acknowledge competing claims to their ground. Instead, following Caldwell's recent argument for demography (Caldwell, 1996), sub-disciplinary boundaries are being drawn tighter. This retreat into exclusionary fortress-like disciplines and sub-specialties invokes an analysis of the power relations involved in the academy that feminist, post-colonial and other emancipatory scholarship, including an emerging feminist geography, has refined over the last three decades.

White and Jackson's (1995:113) diagnosis of population geography supports Findlay and Graham but they correctly argue that Findlay and Graham's agenda is essentially palliative rather than transformative. Instead, drawing on Halfacree and Boyle's (1993) thinking in migration research, White and Jackson (1995:113) argue for a re-examination of the basic discourses in population geography which would move the focus from causes of demographic events to an understanding of migration events in the longer biographical flow of knowledgeable, self-reflexive human subjects. Demographic events are constructed by different individuals differently at different times. In a world dense with diverse and complex power relations, some people, such as for instance head of households, are positioned so that their particular perspective dominates and, in many ways, is validated by a unquestioned acceptance of social categories. White and Jackson (ibid:117) argue that social construction theory recognises these tensions and so works to explore the contested nature of social categories. To apply this insight to the perplexing situation of identifying the sole 'head of a household' who can report what happens in, most often, his household, one may begin with a concept of household as heterogenous not homogenous group of individuals each of whom exercises various forms of power in various ways. Thus different household members, and combinations of household members, would need to be interviewed at different times and in different ways.

These arguments to date have focussed on migration work, which is not surprising since this is the area that dominates population geography. My interest in rethinking demographic events began during post-graduate training in population studies and humanist geography in the 1980s, where, for Manihiki in the Cook Islands, I tried to show the sense of the contradictory notion that people move in order for other people to stay (Underhill, 1989). More recently, in the Papua New Guinea context where many women spend a tremendous amount of time involved in childbearing and child rearing and estimated fertility rates are high, I began to wonder about other ways that fertility could be understood. Local notions of procreation ideologies have been a key feature of Melanesian ethnography because it was widely thought that they form the basis of an understanding of kinship systems – the distinguishing feature of anthropology. Intense debates have raged, however, over how to reconcile biological facts with procreation ideologies. Jorgensen (1983:9) thus concludes that, 'there is always another story ... Indeed, the very elaboration of conception ideologies in Papua New Guinea hinges upon a certain willingness or eagerness to innovate upon the facts of life'. This raises the critical question, what then is a fact? While anthropologist Greenhalgh (1986:259) attempts to remake demographic analysis to incorporate the roles of culture and history, gender and power in reproductive life,⁵ this manoeuvring within rational argumentation fails to significantly empower women either in the academy or in villages and streets. Within ethnographies of communities in Papua New Guinea, alternative accounts of reason are thus turned to; from discourse theory, structuralism (Sturzenhofeker, 1993) and post-structuralism as well as psychoanalysis.

As White and Jackson (1995:121) argue demographic events are often the most stressful changes in people's lives and as such are imbued with a range of social meaning. The event of a birth or death is more than just a discrete event in time and place but has the potential to disrupt, subvert and reconstitute social relations. To understand the power of these events requires more than recording the time and place of the event and more than the material context within which the event occurred. It also requires an understanding of how the event was discursively constructed. Population geographers may have been content in the past to leave these understandings to other disciplines, but not so today. In the following sections I turn to population geographies in the Pacific and feminist geography to show how this might be done.

MOVING MEN: POPULATION GEOGRAPHIES IN THE PACIFIC⁶

It is difficult to identify clearly who are the population geographers working in the Pacific since many geographers of various persuasions have worked in the Pacific and population issues are regularly incorporated into their work. There are also sociologists, demographers and economists who have made substantial contributions to the region's population debates. To avoid the probability of wrongly categorising scholars, I refer instead to population geographies as work by geographers in which the broader concept of population is the focus rather than a context. Taking this definition, most works have been written by men about men's moves⁷ (notable exceptions are Young, 1977; Fahey, 1988; and Chung, 1991).

To their widely unrecognised credit, population geographers in the Pacific have directly addressed many of the substantive issues and difficult topics mentioned by Findlay and Graham (1991) (for example, Bayliss-Smith *et al.*, 1988; Campbell, 1984). These works have also been argued from a variety of different theoretical frameworks (see Bedford, 1973; Bonnemaison, 1976; Chapman, 1970; Chung, 1991; Connell, 1980; Friesen, 1989; Young, 1977), and much of this has contributed to wider debates about migration patterns and processes relevant to other third world situations (Chapman and Prothero, 1985).⁸ Close attention to the local historical contexts that they were working in led many of these population geographers to develop innovative

methodologies even if, as White and Jackson (1995) suggest, it was through empirical necessity rather than theoretical justification.

The weakness of the theoretical frameworks employed becomes clearer because despite some promising theoretical discussion about the nature of truth (Bayliss-Smith, 1988:11), the basic assumptions underlying most of the positivist approaches undertaken in population geographies in the Pacific were unquestioned. Here I am thinking about beginning with questions like, 'How do the various phases of a woman's pregnancy affect what she and her family does and where they go?' This would lead to questions about what these various phases might be. During my time⁹ in Wanigela, a settlement of some 1500 people located south of Tufi in Oro Province, Papua New Guinea, I was always reminded that the three trimesters of pregnancy that I knew, based on western medical knowledge, bore little resemblance to those of women in Wanigela. Once epistemological questions like this are raised, difficult ontological issues also arise: in what ways do children of different ages count and what form, shape, importance does the unborn child take? There are no easy answers here (see Grosz, 1997) and some may argue that this is best left to philosophers. However, I think a little more philosophy in our work might enrich our scholarship. Certainly, there is a potent sharpness about an approach that directly considers sexually embodied activities, especially of pregnant women.

Unfortunately, many of these empirically detailed population geographies of the 1970s and 1980s are unknown to population geographers outside of the Pacific (eg Halfacree and Boyle, 1993). There are likely to be many reasons for this, but I think the dominance of northern hemisphere scholarship is one contributing factor. Recently at a major geography conference in North America, I suggested to a presenter that her study on transformations at the rural-urban interface in the Philippines might benefit from reading about population mobility and identity in Pacific geography. Perhaps other Pacific geographers have been similarly dismissed.

METAPHORS AND LOCAL EPISTEMOLOGIES – WHISPERED WORDS

If there was a preoccupation with defining the spatial and temporal dimensions of a move in the 1980s (eg Bedford, 1981), the 1990s have seen reinvigorated debates which focus on the link between social science research on migration and policy development (Hayes, 1991; Bedford, 1997) as Nash (1994a) suggests. Although these links are complex and require further analysis, I am concerned that we may be talking across discourses. Following Barnes and Duncan (1992:8) I use the concept of discourses to refer to an open-ended collectivity of combinations of narratives, concepts, ideologies and signifying practices, each relevant to a particular realm of social relations. Between different discourses, words may have different connotations because words do not have any pre-given connection to that which they are referring to. Instead, as Barnes and Duncan (ibid:8) continue, the relation between the words and the condition is socially constructed and therefore variable. Thus, understandings of material reality or facts, like people moving from place to place and pregnancy, will vary among cultural groups, classes, races, genders or any other such series of people who come together around a common purpose, however contingently or briefly.

Young's concept of 'seriality' (Young, 1994) is useful here in that women, for instance, can be seen as constantly and unselfconsciously shifting between groups. For example, in the morning my pregnant sister-in-law would prepare breakfast for her natal family, then walk to the market with women who had gardens near her own to sell excess food. She would then join the women attending the ante-natal clinic before visiting her husband's grandmother to prepare her a meal. Thus in one morning she would have operated in her natal family group, in her 'village' women's group, as a member of the group of currently pregnant women who attended the ante-natal clinic and as an in-law. In each group different power relations were at play. In her natal group, and despite her advanced stage of pregnancy, she was expected by her husband and her father to prepare breakfast because she had four other children to care for, including her first-born and only son who was attending junior school. While her husband, father and I, as 'big sister',¹⁰ amused the children, she cheerfully prepared and served us food and tea. Happily joining other women from her village, she was assisted in carrying some of the produce she would sell at the market, as she did for other pregnant women when she herself was not pregnant. She was a reluctant member of the group of women who presented for ante-natal care. However, she had been experiencing pain from a malarial swollen spleen (her explanation for the cause but my words), and I had encouraged her to attend thinking it would encourage her to deliver 'more safely' in the clinic rather than at home where I was nervous about handling complications. Finally, her obligation to her ageing grandmother-in-law was partly encouraged by her husband but also was the result of her own sense of care and fondness for the old lady. Rather than representing women in Wanigela as 'a self-consciously, mutually acknowledging collective with a self-conscious purpose' it is more useful to acknowledge them as an 'a unselfconscious collective unity' that is subject to various changes as different individual women enter and leave the collective (Young, 1994). This does not mean we need to develop some sort of master vision to keep track of the changes. Rather that we can work with fluid entities, especially as we ourselves are part of these entities.

Although not explicitly stated, humanist geographers have already been working with these ideas in the Pacific. Chapman and Bonnemaison's work on population mobility has been particularly enlightening although never directly cast in post-structuralist terms. However, as the following selective analysis shows the whispers of such analysis was present. Chapman suggests, as early as 1975, that the field census is a tautological tool in that the information one gets from asking questions in a field census is strongly influenced by the questions one asks (Chapman, 1975b). While discursive reconstructions of the material world are recognised, greater credibility is given to knowledge analysed on the basis of complete censuses. Chapman and historian Bennett (1980) continue this line of thinking when they describe the tremendous effort that went into designing an appropriate tool to gather fertility data in the Solomon Islands. This included translation into local vernaculars and intensive training of local people to be interviewers. Despite this effort, the language of the fertility survey still left village people perplexed and uncomfortable discussing sensitive issues. It was only when the survey instrument was couched in local idioms, thanks to the advice of a long-time resident clergyman, that there was a feeling that they were getting good data. Here, the power of different discursive reconstructions of the material world is critical to the entire research effort.

Chapman's (1985) introduction to a collection of essays from humanists and social scientists discussing mobility and identity in the island Pacific once again contains the seeds of a discursive analysis. He writes, 'the world of the individual and social experience – in this case of mobility and identity – is not a natural, physical or mechanical project but rather a human construction' (Chapman, 1985:2). However, the power relations implicit in the domination of mechanical thinking about population mobility remain largely undisturbed despite more recent challenges through the careful analysis of metaphors (Chapman, 1991) and promotion of local epistemologies (Chapman, 1995). Another humanist geographer, Bonnemaison, discusses mobility in Vanuatu by invoking the metaphor of the tree and the canoe - the latter being the symbol of mobility, the former the symbol of rootedness and stability. In crafting the canoe out of the tree we can see the apparently contradictory notion of moving in order to stay still is not contradictory at all, but that the two are intimately connected such that they constitute and are constitutive of each other (Bonnemaison, 1985). So too can men and women be seen as constitutive of each other because men are compared to a tree, while women are compared to birds. In this metaphor, the bird is associated with the mobility of the air and sky but requires the tree, and the soil it grows in, to survive. On the other hand the tree and earth remains a masculine domain which also requires birds for spreading its seeds. Jolly (1994) makes the same observation although the contrast is between Melanesian kastom which is solidly rooted like a banyan tree whereas European ways are roving like a bird or a woman.

These humanist approaches recognise the importance of subjectivity in understanding population movements which may not sound too different to contemporary post-structuralist interpretations. However, there is more to recognising that discourses also have substantial constitutive effects on the conduct of day-to-day life or that discourse, or language, constructs reality. More importantly, it is the association of particular discourses with particular institutions that legitimate the truths that these institutions in turn produce (Barnes and Duncan, 1992:9). Hence there is a continued scholarship based on the statistical analysis of demographic events because such work uncritically works with categories familiar to the agencies which fund research, themselves constituted by the works they support. This is not surprising as a key feature of new intellectual inquiry, including feminist geography, is its struggle for legitimacy.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES OF POPULATION GEOGRAPHIES

One of the major problems for humanist perspectives in population geography in the Pacific and elsewhere, is the avoidance of the gendered nature of subjectivities and more specifically the avoidance of sexually embodied subjectivities. In spite of the advances made by Chapman (1995:258) to 'discover more alternatives to the binary categories, the dichotomous patterns of thought, and the dualistic frames of intellectual reference within which so much of western scholarship has been articulated and frozen for far too long', I think it is unlikely to happen until the power relations involved in retaining binary logic are directly addressed. Furthermore, I am unsure whether it is even possible for people trained in western education to avoid thinking in terms of binary logic. Hence, the need to encourage an academic environment which allows for the possibility of working in paradoxical space where one is positioned both within and without (Rose, 1993).

Feminist scholarship has struggled with many paradoxes. One of the key ones has been how to retain its emancipatory voice while also arguing against the essentialising tendencies of modernist scholarship, which collapse all women into one naturalised category. Although the power of numbers has always been an emancipatory catch-cry, by naturalising the category of women, it implies that there can be no change since the bedrock of biology is immutable. Working through this paradoxical situation is critical for feminist scholars because personal commitments work towards a world free of dominant power relations, beginning with that of men as a group over women as a group. Various strategies have been developed, such as that of strategic essentialisation (Mohanty, 1988) and of seriality (Young, 1994) and useful coalitions are also being made with post-colonial scholarship which argues, more problematically, against the concept of gender (Oyewumi, 1993). The challenge of working along these boundaries which also transgress other aspects of social identity, like one's colour or sexuality, is that they force one into imagining the world differently. This is not difficult if one works simultaneously with the discursive construction of reality and its material expression.

Totally separate from this body of literature are the population geographies in the Pacific which remain deeply masculinist projects. In making this claim I draw on Rose (1993) who argues that masculinist work is work that claims to be exhaustive, but instead underplays the differences of women's existence and presents it as if the concerns of men represent the concerns of everyone. This definition rests on the analysis of the Cartesian thinking which distinguishes the mind from the body and in doing so gives greater value to issues of the mind which in turn is associated with men while issues of the body remain feminine and thereby inferior. The masculinism of these projects is not just because most of the authors are men (and white) but because there is an unproblematic acceptance of gender categories even though there has been considerable innovation around the questions of what is a move. Questions such as, 'What about the women?' and 'Which women?' need to be raised as intellectual rather than methodological issues. This would encourage a recognition of situatedness of these studies which then opens up space for other perspectives.

One of the greatest strengths of contemporary feminist geographies is the coalitioning of different perspectives based on the recognition of partial. situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988). The debate has gone further than merely recognising the existence of women as both subjects and scholars (Bondi, 1990; Bowlby and Mackenzie, 1982; Christopherson, 1989; Johnson, 1985, 1994; Kirby, 1993; Kofman and Peake, 1990; McDowell, 1988; Monk and Hansen, 1982; Tivers, 1978). Although the commitment to change women's lives remains, the focus is not on roles and relations but on difference. 'Sex', which is taken to be natural and God-given, and 'gender', concepts understood differently in different places and times, are no longer the pivotal analytical issues. Rather, it is the nature of power relations between different people including relations between men and women but also relations between women who differ by, for instance, age, education, parity and where they live. The power that I am talking about is not the structural power of institutions, of the obviously 'powerful' over the obviously powerless, of big over small. The power I am referring to is something that we all have. Unlike the structural power of large institutions, this power is constantly shifting, creating contradictions and also opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The challenge of postmodernisms in philosophy, the arts and the social sciences has opened up population geography in the Pacific and elsewhere for closer analysis. This scrutiny extends beyond the theoretical subjectivities found in all geographies. It challenges grand claims and meta-narratives which privilege particular vantage points over others. Instead, geographies need to acknowledge and incorporate a range of other new voices. Feminist voices (Figiel, 1996), vernacular languages (Hau'ofa, 1993; Underhill-Sem, 1998), voices with other world-views (Kyakas and Wiessner, 1992) – these are all needed to enhance geographical understandings. As 'other' perspectives or voices are recognised and heard, new geographies can be written.

Despite the difficulty of working where it is considered that data are either non-existent, unreliable or of poor quality, population mobility studies in the Pacific have flourished and have provided critical, though largely unrecognised, shifts in thinking about what is meant by migration and population mobility. A key feature of this innovative thinking in migration studies has been the adoption of analytical approaches informed by humanism. Still to be fully recognised however are the theoretical concerns raised increasingly by feminist geographers. Heeding Zelinsky's call to engage with the work of feminist geographers, raises the troubling questions however about the power of scientific knowledge (Harding, 1991). However, once these questions are raised it is easy to get stuck, either passively or defensively, in a naive retreat. One way to work through this quagmire is through the theoretical direction provided by an embodied geography because once we can deal with the geography closest-in (Longhurst, 1994), other geographies take on different forms also.

NOTES

- 1 I use these highly contestable descriptives in full knowledge of their power to imply the existence of clear boundaries, internal homogeneity and disregard for local and historical specificities. Many scholars have addressed these complex issues in more depth than I can here (see for instance Chandra Mohanty 1988, Arturo Escobar 1996 and Gillian Rose 1993). However, continued use of these terms in scholarly and popular press makes them difficult to discard outright. As a compromise, I use smaller case to indicate my discomfort with them as proper nouns.
- 2 Although many geographers and other social scientists are increasingly, and more usefully, writing across disciplines and sub-disciplines.
- 3 Although itself initiated from within a western academic tradition.
- 4 See also Basu (1997) and Finkle and McIntosh (1994).
- 5 This argument builds upon Brigette Jordan's (1990) concept of the biosociality of childbirth.
- 6 It is notable there has not been a review of population geography in the Pacific since Chapman's article in 1975 (Chapman 1975a), although Overton has looked more broadly at human geography (Overton 1993). While such a task may be timely, my intention here is to focus on the genealogy of particular ideas rather than a broader review.
- 7 As a graduate student of Chapman's in the early 1980s, I remember him proudly displaying the cover of his recently published book edited with Prothero. All but one member of the class were women but to Murray's surprise, though no one else's, someone said, 'But they're all men'.
- 8 For example that contemporary movement patterns are part of pre-existing patterns of movement and are not just induced through contact with the 'modern world' as Zelinsky initially proposed.
- 9 First as a relative by marriage then as I undertook my formal fieldwork for doctoral studies.
- 10 Being the wife of her oldest brother.

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