Now that we have introduced you to the ways in which the American gender system interacts with, and is modified by, a complex set of categories of difference and inequality, we turn to an exploration of the ways in which the prism of culture interacts with gender definitions and arrangements. Generations of researchers in the social sciences, especially anthropology and sociology, have opened our eyes to the array of “genderscapes” around the globe. When we look through our kaleidoscope at the interaction between the prisms of gender and culture, we see different patterns that blur, blend, and are cast into a variety of culturally gendered configurations (Baker, 1999).

What Is Culture?

Culture consists of the beliefs, practices, and material objects that are created and shared within a group of people, thus constituting their way of life (Stone & McKee, 1999). The anthropological and sociological view of culture makes it clear that, without culture, human experience would have little shape or meaning (Schwalbe, 2005). A group’s culture provides members with the assumptions and expectations on which their social interaction is built and in which their identities are forged. It also makes groups distinct from each other.

Indeed, the members of different cultural groups create very different realities. For example in some cultures, such as the Sambia of New Guinea, people do not perceive or categorize people as homosexual, and yet members of such cultures may regularly engage in same-gender sex (Herdt, 1997). Not only do different groups of people produce different cultures, the cultures they produce are dynamic. That is, people continually generate and alter culture both as individuals and as members of particular groups; as a result, all cultures undergo change as their members evaluate, resist, and challenge beliefs and practices (Stone & McKee, 1999). To illustrate, in the United States today, racist beliefs about intellectual and other differences between so-called racial groups are eroding, in part because scientists and social scientists have demonstrated that race is a social fiction rather than a biological fact and
in part because the ongoing civil rights movement has been successful in dismantling much of the racist infrastructure of American society.

The prisms of gender and culture are inextricably intertwined. That is, people construct specific gender beliefs and practices in relation to particular cultural traditions and societal conditions. Cultures are gendered in distinctive ways and gender systems and, in turn, shape both material and symbolic cultural products (see, for example, Chapter 5). As you will discover, the crosscultural analyses of gender presented in this chapter provide critical support for the social constructionist argument that gender is a situated, negotiated, contested, and changing set of practices and understandings.

Let’s begin with a set of observations about gender in different cultures. Do you know that there are cultures in which individuals can move from one gender category to another without being stigmatized? If you traveled from country to country around the world, you would find cultures in which men are gentle, soft-spoken, and modest; and cultures in which women are viewed as strong and take on roles that are labeled masculine in the United States. Although we hear news about extreme forms of oppression of women in some places in the world (e.g., bride-burning in parts of India), there are other places where women and men live in relative harmony and equality. Also, there are cultural groups in which the social prisms of difference and inequality that operate in the United States (e.g., social class, race, sexual orientation) are minimal, inconsequential, or nonexistent (see chapter readings by Christine Helliwell and Maria Lepowsky).

**THE PROBLEM OF ETHNOCENTRISM IN CROSSCULTURAL RESEARCH**

If you find any of these observations unsettling or even shocking, then you have probably tapped into the problem of bias in crosscultural studies. One of the great challenges of crosscultural research is learning to transcend one’s own cultural assumptions to be able to value and understand another culture in and of itself. It takes practice, conscious commitment, and self-awareness to get outside of one’s own cultural box. After all, seeing what our culture wants us to see is precisely what socialization is about. Not only do cultural blinders make it difficult for us to see what gender is and how it is configured and reconfigured by various social prisms within our own culture, they can make it even more challenging to grasp the profoundly different ways in which people in other cultures think about and organize human relations.

We tend to “see what we believe,” which means that we are likely to deny gender patterns that vary from our own cultural experience and/or to misinterpret patterns that are different from our own. For example, the Europeans who first explored and colonized Africa were horrified by the ways in which African forms of gender and sexuality diverged from their own. They had no framework in which to understand warrior women, such as Nzinga of the Ndongo kingdom of the Mbundu (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Nzinga was king of her people, dressed as man, and was surrounded by a harem of young men who dressed as women and were her “wives” (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). However, her behavior made sense in the context of her culture, one in which people perceived gender as situational and symbolic, thus allowing for alternative genders (Murray & Roscoe, 1998).

It is a challenge to resist the tendency toward ethnocentrism (i.e., the belief that the ideas and practices of one’s own group are the standard and that divergent cultures are substandard or inferior). However the rewards for bracketing the ethnocentric attitude are extremely valuable because one is then able to understand how and why gender operates across cultures. Thanks to the wide-ranging research of sociologists and anthropologists, we are increasingly able to grasp the peculiarities of our gender system and understand more deeply lifeways, including genderscapes, in other places in the world. With this capacity for escaping ethnocentrism in mind, how about testing your capacity to transcend ethnocentrism? Read the fifth endnote to the
Newland article, in this chapter, on female circumcision. Was your initial reaction ethnocentric? If so, how might you adjust your thinking and feeling to overcome that reaction?

The readings in this chapter will introduce you to some of the variety in gender beliefs and practices across cultures and illustrate three of the most important findings of crosscultural research on gender: (1) there is no universal definition or experience of gender; indeed gender is not constituted as oppositional and binary in all societies; (2) gender inequality, specifically the dominance of men over women, is not the rule everywhere in the world; and (3) gender arrangements, whatever they may be, are socially constructed and, thus, ever-evolving.

**There Is No Universal Definition or Experience of Gender**

Although people in many contemporary cultures perceive at least some differences between women and men, and assign different tasks and responsibilities to people based on gender categories, these differences vary both from culture to culture and within cultures. There is no unified ideal or definition of masculinity or femininity across cultures. In some cultures, such as the Ju/'hoansi of Namibia and Botswana, women and men alike can become powerful and respected healers, while in others, such as the United States today, powerful healing roles are dominated by men (Bonvillain, 2001). Among the seminomadic, pastoral Tuareg of the Sahara and the Sahel, women have considerable economic independence as livestock owners, herders, gardeners, and leathersmiths, while in other cultural groups, such as the Taliban of Afghanistan, women are restricted to household labor and economic dependence on men (Rasmussen, 2001).

The readings in this chapter highlight some of the extraordinary crosscultural differences in beliefs about men and women and in the tasks and rights assigned to them. They offer insights into how gender is shaped across cultures by a number of factors including ideology, participation in economic production, and control over sexuality and reproduction. For example, in the chapter reading with the titillating title, “It’s Only a Penis,” Christine Helliwell provides an account of the Gerai of Borneo, a cultural group in which rape does not occur. Helliwell argues that the Gerai belief in the biological sameness of women and men is a key to understanding their rape-free society. Her research offers an important account of how assumptions about human biology, in this case femaleness and maleness, are culturally shaped. In a similar vein, the reading on woman-woman marriage among the Gikuyu of Kenya illustrates the capacity of humans to invent and institutionalize marital relationships that are not based on the assumption of heterosexual attraction.

In addition, the two-sex (male or female), two-gender (feminine or masculine) and two sexual orientation (homosexual or heterosexual) system of Western culture is not a universal mode of categorization and organization. As you know from reading Serena Nanda’s article on gender variants in Native North America (Chapter 1), the two-spirit role was widespread and accepted in many American Indian tribes. Gilbert Herdt (1997), an expert on the anthropology of sexual orientation and gender, points out that the two-spirit role reached a high point in its cultural elaboration among the Mojave Indians who “sanctioned both male (alyha) and female (hwame) two-spirit roles, each of which had its own distinctive social positions and worldviews” (92).

**Gender Inequality Is Not the Rule Everywhere**

Gender and power go together but not in only one way. The relationship of power to gender in human groups varies from extreme male dominance to relative equality between women and men. Most societies are organized so that men, in general, have greater access to and control over valued resources such as wealth, authority, and prestige. At the extreme are intensely patriarchal societies, such as traditional China and India, in
which women were dominated by men in multiple contexts and relationships. In traditional China, for example, sons were preferred, female infanticide was common, divorce could only be initiated by husbands, restrictions on girls and women were embodied in the mutilating practice of foot binding, and the suicide rate among young wives—who typically endured extreme isolation and hardship—was higher than any other age and gender category (Bonvillain, 2001).

The United States also has a history of gender relations in which White men as a group have had power over women as a group (and over men of color). For many decades, men’s power was overt and legal. For example, in the nineteenth century, husbands were legally empowered to beat wives, women did not have voting rights, and women were legally excluded from many occupations (Stone & McKee, 1999). Today gender inequality takes more covert and subtle forms. For example, women earn less, on average, than do men of equal educational and occupational level; women are far more likely to be sexually objectified; and women are more likely to shoulder the burden of a double day of work inside and outside home (Coltrane & Adams, 2001; Chapters 7 and 8).

Understanding the relationship between power and gender requires us to use our sharpest sociological radar. To start, it is important to understand that power does not reside in individuals per se. For example, neither presidents nor bosses have power in a vacuum. They require the support of personnel and special resources such as media, weapons, and money. Power is a group phenomenon, and it exists only so long as a powerful group, its ruling principles, and its control over resources are sustained (Kimmel, 2000).

In addition, not all members of an empowered group have the same amount of power. In the United States and similar societies, male power benefits some men more than others. In fact, many individual men do not occupy formal positions of power, and many do not feel powerful in their everyday lives (Johnson, 2001; Kimmel, 2000; see the reading by Pyke in Chapter 8). Yet, major institutions and organizations (e.g., government, big business, the military, the mass media) in the United States are gendered masculine, with controlling positions in those arenas dominated by men, but not just any men (Johnson, 2001). Controlling positions are overwhelmingly held by White men who typically come from privileged backgrounds and whose lives appear to conform to a straight and narrow path (Johnson, 2001; Kimmel, 2000). As we learned in Chapter 2, the relationship of gender to power in a nation such as the United States is complicated by interactions among structures of domination and subordination such as race, social class, and sexual orientation.

Not all societies are as highly and intricately stratified by gender, race, social class, and other social categories of privilege and power as is the United States. Many cultural groups organize relationships in ways that give most or all adults access to similar rights, prestige, decision-making authority, and autonomy in their households and communities. Traditional Agta, Ju'/hoansi, and Iroquois societies are good examples. In other cultural groups, such as the precontact Tlingit and Haida of the Canadian Pacific coastal region, relations among people were based on their position in economic and status hierarchies, yet egalitarian valuation of women and men prevailed (Bonvillain, 2001).

The point is that humans do not inevitably create inequalities out of perceived differences. Thus, even though there is at least some degree of division of labor by gender in every cultural group today, differences in men and women’s work do not inexorably lead to patriarchal relations in which men monopolize high-status positions in important institutions and women are relegated to a restricted world of low-status activities and tasks. To help illustrate, Maria Lepowsky’s ethnography of Vanatinai social relations provides us with a model of a society in which the principles of personal autonomy and freedom of choice prevail. The gender ideology of the Vanatinai is egalitarian, and their belief in equality manifests itself in daily life. For example, women as well as men own and inherit land and other valuables. Women choose their
own marriage partners and lovers, and they divorce at will. Any individual on Vanatinai may try to become a leader by demonstrating superior knowledge and skill.

Gender inequality is not the rule everywhere. Male dominance, patriarchy, gender inequality—whatever term one uses—is not the inevitable state of human relations. Additionally, patriarchy itself is not unitary. Patriarchy does not assume a particular shape, and it does not mean that women have no control or influence in their communities. Even in the midst of patriarchy, women and men may create identities and relationships that allow for autonomy and independence. See, for example, Annie George’s discussion of the emergence of more egalitarian relations between working-class Indian women and men.

GENDER ARRANGEMENTS ARE EVER-EVOLVING

The crosscultural story of gender takes us back to the metaphor of the kaleidoscope. Life is an ongoing process of change from one pattern to another. We can never go back to “the way things were” at some earlier moment in time, nor can we predict exactly how the future will unfold. This is, of course, the story of gender around the world. For example, the chapter reading by Annie George explores the links between changes in the meaning and practice of male honor and the rise of greater autonomy among married women in a working-class neighborhood of Mumbai, India.

Two of the major sources of change in gender meanings and practices across cultures are culture contact and diffusion of beliefs and practices across the globe (Sorensen, 2000; Ritzer, 2004). Among the most well-documented accounts of such change have been those that demonstrate how Western gender systems were imposed on people whose gender beliefs and arrangements varied from Western assumptions and practices. For example, Native American multiple gender systems were actively, and sometimes violently, discouraged by European colonists (Herdt, 1997; see Nanda in Chapter 1). Today, globalization—a complex process of worldwide diffusion of practices, images, and ideas (Ritzer, 2004)—raises the problem of the development of a world order, including a gender order, that may be increasingly dominated by Western cultural values and patterns (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999; see Chapter 10 for further discussion). Newland’s analysis of female circumcision (and male circumcision) as practiced by Muslim Sundanese people in West Java draws careful attention to the dangers of new forms of Western colonialism that cast “third world” women as victims always in need of being saved by so-called “first world” women and men.

Culture contact and diffusion via globalization are by no means the only source of changing gender arrangements (see Chapter 10 for detailed discussion of gender change). The forces of change are many and complex, and they have resulted in a mix of tendencies toward rigid, hierarchical gender relations and toward gender flexibility and equality, depending upon the specific cultural context and forces of change experienced by particular groups of people. In all of this, there is one fact: people are not bound by any set of gender beliefs and practices. Culture change is inevitable and thus is change in the genderscape.

REFERENCES

104  •  PART I: PRISMS


Introduction to Reading 10

Anthropologist Christine Helliwell provides a challenging account of a cultural group, the Gerai of Indonesia, in which rape does not occur. She links the freedom from rape among the Gerai people to peculiar aspects of the relatively egalitarian nature of their gender relations. Helliwell’s research questions many gender beliefs held by members of Western cultures today.

1. How are men’s and women’s sexual organs conceptualized among the Gerai, and what are the consequences for Gerai understandings of sexual intercourse?
2. Genitalia do not determine identity in Gerai. What does?
3. What does Helliwell mean when she states that “rape imposes difference as much as it is produced by difference” (p. 812)?

“It’s Only a Penis”

Rape, Feminism, and Difference

Christine Helliwell

In 1985 and 1986 I carried out anthropological fieldwork in the Dayak community of Gerai in Indonesian Borneo. One night in September 1985, a man of the village climbed through a window into the freestanding house where a widow lived with her elderly mother, younger (unmarried) sister, and young children. The widow awoke, in darkness, to feel the man

inside her mosquito net, gripping her shoulder while he climbed under the blanket that covered her and her youngest child as they slept (her older children slept on mattresses nearby). He was whispering, “be quiet, be quiet!” She responded by sitting up in bed and pushing him violently, so that he stumbled backward, became entangled with her mosquito net, and then, finally free, moved across the floor toward the window. In the meantime, the woman climbed from her bed and pursued him, shouting his name several times as she did so. His hurried exit through the window, with his clothes now in considerable disarray, was accompanied by a stream of abuse from the woman and by excited interrogations from wakened neighbors in adjoining houses.

I awoke the following morning to raucous laughter on the longhouse verandah outside my apartment where a group of elderly women gathered regularly to thresh, winnow, and pound rice. They were recounting this tale loudly, and with enormous enjoyment, to all in the immediate vicinity. As I came out of my door, one was engaged in mimicking the man climbing out the window, sarong falling down, genitals askew. Those others working or lounging near her on the verandah—both men and women—shrieked with laughter.

When told the story, I was shocked and appalled. An unknown man had tried to climb into the bed of a woman in the dead, dark of night? I knew what this was called: attempted rape. The woman had seen the man and recognized him (so had others in the village, wakened by her shouting). I knew what he deserved: the full weight of the law. My own fears about being a single woman alone in a strange place, sleeping in a dwelling that could not be secured at night, bubbled to the surface. My feminist sentiments poured out. “How can you laugh?” I asked my women friends; “this is a very bad thing that he has tried to do.” But my outrage simply served to fuel the hilarity. “No, not bad,” said one of the old women (a particular friend of mine), “simply stupid.”

I felt vindicated in my response when, two hours later, the woman herself came onto the verandah to share betel nut and tobacco and to broadcast the story. Her anger was palpable, and she shouted for all to hear her determination to exact a compensation payment from the man. Thinking to obtain information about local women’s responses to rape, I began to question her. Had she been frightened? I asked. Of course she had—Wouldn’t I feel frightened if I awoke in the dark to find an unknown person inside my mosquito net? Wouldn’t I be angry? Why then, I asked, hadn’t she taken the opportunity, while he was entangled in her mosquito net, to kick him hard or to hit him with one of the many wooden implements near at hand? She looked shocked. Why would she do that? she asked—after all, he hadn’t hurt her. No, but he had wanted to, I replied. She looked at me with puzzlement. Not able to find a local word for rape in my vocabulary, I scrabbled to explain myself: “He was trying to have sex with you.” I said, “although you didn’t want to. He was trying to hurt you.” She looked at me, more with pity than with puzzlement now, although both were mixed in her expression. “Tin [Christine], it’s only a penis” she said. “How can a penis hurt anyone?”

RAPE, FEMINISM, AND DIFFERENCE

A central feature of many feminist writings about rape in the past twenty years is their concern to eschew the view of rape as a natural function of male biology and to stress instead its bases in society and culture. It is curious, then, that so much of this work talks of rape in terms that suggest—either implicitly or explicitly—that it is a universal practice. To take only several examples: Pauline Bart and Patricia O’Brien tell us that “every female from nine months to ninety years is at risk” (1985, 1); Anna Clark argues that “all women know the paralyzing fear of walking down a dark street at night....It seems to be a fact of life that the fear of rape imposes a curfew on our movements” (1987, 1); Catharine MacKinnon claims that “sexuality is central to women’s definition and forced sex is central to sexuality,” so “rape is indigenous, not exceptional,
to women’s social condition” (1989b, 172) and “all women live all the time under the shadow of the threat of sexual abuse” (1989a, 340); Lee Madigan and Nancy Gamble write of “the global terrorism of rape” (1991, 21–2); and Susan Brison asserts that “the fact that all women’s lives are restricted by sexual violence is indisputable” (1993, 17). This is particularly puzzling given that Peggy Reeves Sanday, for one, long ago demonstrated that while rape occurs widely throughout the world, it is by no means a human universal: some societies can indeed be classified as rape free (1981).

There are two general reasons for this universalization of rape among Western feminists. The first of these has to do with the understanding of the practice as horrific by most women in Western societies. In these settings, rape is seen as “a fate worse than, or tantamount to, death” (S. Marcus 1992, 387): a shattering of identity that, for instance, left one North American survivor feeling “not quite sure whether I had died and the world went on without me, or whether I was alive in a totally alien world” (Brison 1993, 10). A second, equally deep-seated reason for the feminist tendency to universalize rape stems from Western feminism’s emphasis on difference between men and women and from its consequent linking of rape and difference. Two types of difference are involved here. The first of these is difference in social status and power; thus rape is linked quite explicitly, in contemporary feminist accounts, to patriarchal social forms. Indeed, this focus on rape as stemming from difference in social position is what distinguishes feminist from other kinds of accounts of rape (see Ellis 1989, 10). In this view, inequality between men and women is linked to men’s desire to possess, subjugate, and control women, with rape constituting a central means by which the freedom of women is limited and their continued submission to men ensured. Since many feminists continue to believe that patriarchy is universal—or, at the very least, to feel deeply ambivalent on this point—there is a tendency among us to believe that rape, too, is universal.

However, the view of women as everywhere oppressed by men has been extensively critiqued within the anthropological literature. A number of anthropologists have argued that in some societies, while men and women may perform different roles and occupy different spaces, they are nevertheless equal in value, status, and power.

But there is a second type of difference between men and women that also, albeit largely implicitly, underlies the assumption that rape is universal, and it is the linkage between this type of difference and the treatment of rape in feminist accounts with which I am largely concerned in this article. I refer to the assumption by most Western feminists writing on rape that men and women have different bodies and, more specifically, different genitalia: that they are, in other words differently sexed. Furthermore, it is taken for granted in most feminist accounts that these differences render the former biologically, or “naturally,” capable of penetrating and therefore brutalizing the latter and render the latter “naturally” able to be brutalized. Rape of women by men is thus assumed to be universal because the same “biological” bodily differences between men and women are believed to exist everywhere.

Unfortunately, the assumption that preexisting bodily difference between men and women underlies rape has blinded feminists writing on the subject to the ways the practice of rape itself creates and inscribes such difference. This seems particularly true in contemporary Western societies where the relationship between rape and bodily/genital dimorphism appears to be an extremely intimate one. Judith Butler (1990, 1993) has argued (following Foucault 1978) that the Western emphasis on sexual difference is a product of the heterosexualization of desire within Western societies over the past few centuries, which “requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ where these are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (1990, 17). The practice of rape in Western contexts can only properly be understood with reference to this heterosexual matrix, to the division of humankind into two distinct—and in many respects opposed—types of body (and hence types of person). While it is certainly the case that rape is linked in contemporary
Western societies to disparities of power and status between men and women, it is the particular discursive form that those disparities take—their elaboration in terms of the discourse of sex—that gives rape its particular meaning and power in these contexts.

Sharon Marcus has already argued convincingly that the act of rape “feminizes” women in Western settings, so that “the entire female body comes to be symbolized by the vagina, itself conceived of as a delicate, perhaps inevitably damaged and pained inner space” (1992, 398). I would argue further that the practice of rape in these settings—both its possibility and its actualization—not only feminizes women but masculinizes men as well. This masculinizing character of rape is very clear in, for instance, Sanday’s ethnography of fraternity gang rape in North American universities (1990b) and, in particular, in material on rape among male prison inmates. In the eyes of these rapists the act of rape marks them as “real men” and marks their victims as not men, that is, as feminine. In this iconography, the “masculine” body (along with the “masculine” psyche), is viewed as hard, penetrative, and aggressive, in contrast to the soft, vulnerable, and violable “feminine” sexuality and psyche. Rape both reproduces and marks the pronounced sexual polarity found in these societies.

Western understandings of gender difference have almost invariably started from the presumption of a presocial bodily difference between men and women (“male” and “female”) that is then somehow acted on by society to produce gender. In particular, the possession of either male genitals or female genitals is understood by most Westerners to be not only the primary marker of gender identity but, indeed, the underlying cause of that identity.

I seek to do two things in this article. First, in providing an account of a community in which rape does not occur, I aim to give the lie to the widespread assumption that rape is universal and thus to invite Western feminists to interrogate the basis of our own tendency to take its universality for granted. The fundamental question is this: Why does a woman of Gerai see a penis as lacking the power to harm her, while I, a white Australian/New Zealand woman, am so ready to see it as having the capacity to defile, to humiliate, to subjugate and, ultimately, to destroy me?

Second, by exploring understandings of sex and gender in a community that stresses identity, rather than difference, between men and women (including men’s and women’s bodies), I aim to demonstrate that Western beliefs in the “sexed” character of bodies are not “natural” in basis but, rather, are a component of specifically Western gendering and sexual regimes. And since the practice of rape in Western societies is profoundly linked to these beliefs, I will suggest that it is an inseparable part of such regimes. This is not to say that the practice of rape is always linked to the kind of heterosexual regime found in the West; even the most cursory glance at any list of societies in which the practice occurs indicates that this is not so. But it is to point out that we will be able to understand rape only ever in a purely localized sense, in the context of the local discourses and practices that are both constitutive of and constituted by it. In drawing out the implications of the Gerai stress on identity between men and women for Gerai gender and sexual relations, I hope to point out some of the possible implications of the Western emphasis on gender difference for Western gender and sexual relations—including the practice of rape.

**Gender, Sex, and Procreation in Gerai**

Gerai is a Dayak community of some seven hundred people in the Indonesian province of Kalimantan Barat (West Borneo). In the twenty months I spent in the community, I heard of no cases of either sexual assault or attempted sexual assault (and since this is a community in which privacy as we understand it in the West is almost nonexistent—in which surveillance by neighbors is at a very high level [see Helliwell 1996]—I would certainly have heard of any such cases had they occurred). In addition, when I questioned men and women about sexual assault, responses ranged from puzzlement to outright incredulity to horror.

While relations between men and women in Gerai can be classified as relatively egalitarian
in many respects, both men and women nevertheless say that men are “higher” than women (Helliwell1995, 364). This greater status and authority does not, however, find expression in the practice of rape, as many feminist writings on the subject seem to suggest that it should. This is because the Gerai view of men as “higher” than women, although equated with certain kinds of increased potency vis-à-vis the world at large, does not translate into a conception of that potency as attached to and manifest through the penis—of men’s genitals as able to brutalize women’s genitals.

Shelly Errington has pointed out that a feature of many of the societies of insular Southeast Asia is a stress on sameness, even identity, between men and women (1990, 35, 39), in contrast to the Western stress on difference between the passive “feminine” object and the active, aggressive “masculine” subject. Gerai understandings of gender fit Errington’s model very well. In Gerai, men and women are not understood as fundamentally different types of persons: there is no sense of a dichotomized masculinity and femininity. Rather, men and women are seen to have the same kinds of capacities and proclivities, but with respect to some, men are seen as “more so” and with respect to others, women are seen as “more so.” Men are said to be braver and more knowledgeable about local law (adat), while women are said to be more persistent and more enduring. All of these qualities are valued. Crucially, in terms of the central quality of nurturance (perhaps the most valued quality in Gerai), which is very strongly marked as feminine among Westerners, Gerai people see no difference between men and women. As one (female) member of the community put it to me: “We all must nurture because we all need.”11 The capacity both to nurture and to need, particularly as expressed through the cultivation of rice as a member of a rice group, is central to Gerai conceptions of personhood: rice is the source of life, and its (shared) production humanizes and socializes individuals (Helliwell, forthcoming). Women and men have identical claims to personhood based on their equal contributions to rice production (there is no notion that women are somehow diminished as persons even though they may be seen as less “high”). As in Strathern’s account of Hagen (1988), the perceived mutuality of rice-field work in Gerai renders inoperative any notion of either men or women as autonomous individual subjects.

It is also important to note that while men’s bravery is linked to a notion of their greater physical strength, it is not equated with aggression—aggression is not valued in most Gerai contexts.12 As a Gerai man put it to me, the wise man is the one “who fights when he has to, and runs away when he can”; such avoidance of violence does not mark a man as lacking in bravery. While it is recognized that a man will sometimes need to fight—and skill and courage in fighting are valued—aggression and hotheadedness are ridiculed as the hallmarks of a lazy and incompetent man. In fact, physical violence between adults is uncommon in Gerai, and all of the cases that I did witness or hear about were extremely mild.13 Doubtless the absence of rape in the community is linked to this devaluing of aggression in general. However, unlike a range of other forms of violence (slapping, beating with a fist, beating with an implement, knifing, premeditated killing, etc.), rape is not named as an offense and accorded a set punishment under traditional Gerai law. In addition, unlike these other forms of violence, rape is something that people in the community find almost impossible to comprehend (“How would he be able to do such a thing?” one woman asked when I struggled to explain the concept of a man attempting to put his penis into her against her will). Clearly, then, more is involved in the absence of rape in Gerai than a simple absence of violence in general.

Central to all of the narratives that Gerai people tell about themselves and their community is the notion of a “comfortable life”: the achievement of this kind of life marks the person and the household as being of value and constitutes the norm to which all Gerai people aspire. Significantly, the content of such a life is seen as identical for both men and women: it is marked
by the production of bountiful rice harvests each year and the successful raising of a number of healthy children to maturity. The core values and aspirations of men and women are thus identical; of the many life histories that I collected while in the community—all of which are organized around this central image—it is virtually impossible to tell those of men from those of women. Two points are significant in this respect. First, a “comfortable life” is predicated on the notion of a partnership between a man and a woman (a conjugal pair). This is because while men and women are seen to have the same basic skills and capacities, men are seen to be “better” at certain kinds of work and women to be “better” at other kinds. Second, and closely related to this, the Gerai notion of men’s and women’s work does not constitute a rigid division of labor: both men and women say that theoretically women can perform all of the work routinely carried out by men, and men can perform all of the work routinely carried out by women. However, men are much better at men’s work, and women are much better at women’s work. Again, what we have here is a stress on identity between men and women at the expense of radical difference.

This stress on identity extends into Gerai bodily and sexual discourses. A number of people (both men and women) assured me that men sometimes menstruate; in addition, menstrual blood is not understood to be polluting, in contrast to how it is seen in many societies that stress more strongly the difference between men and women. While pregnancy and childbirth are spoken of as “women’s work,” many Gerai people claim that under certain circumstances men are also able to carry out this work—but, they say, women are “better” at it and so normally undertake it. In line with this claim, I collected a Gerai myth concerning a lazy woman who was reluctant to take on the work of pregnancy and childbirth. Her husband instead made for himself a lidded container out of bark, wood, and rattan (“like a betel nut container”), which he attached around his waist beneath his loincloth and in which he carried the growing fetus until it was ready to be born. On one occasion when I was watching a group of Gerai men cut up a boar, one, remembering an earlier conversation about the capacity of men to give birth, pointed to a growth in the boar’s body cavity and said with much disapproving shaking of the head: “Look at this. He wants to carry his child. He’s stupid.” In addition, several times I saw fathers push their nipples into the mouths of young children to quiet them; while none of these fathers claimed to be able to produce milk, people nevertheless claimed that some men in the community were able to lactate, a phenomenon also attested to in myth. Men and women are thought to produce the same genital fluid, and this is linked in complex ways to the capacity of both to menstruate. All of these examples demonstrate the community’s stress on bodily identity between men and women.

Furthermore, in Gerai, men’s and women’s sexual organs are explicitly conceptualized as the same. This sexual identity became particularly clear when I asked several people who had been to school (and hence were used to putting pencil to paper) to draw men’s and women’s respective organs for me: in all cases, the basic structure and form of each were the same. One informant, endeavoring to convince me of this sameness, likened both to wooden and bark containers for holding valuables (these vary in size but have the same basic conical shape, narrower at the base and wider at the top). In all of these discussions, it was reiterated that the major difference between men’s and women’s organs is their location: inside the body (women) and outside the body (men). In fact, when I pressed people on this point, they invariably explained that it makes no sense to distinguish between men’s and women’s genitalia themselves; rather, it is location that distinguishes between penis and vulva.15

Heterosexuality constitutes the normative sexual activity in the community and, indeed, I was unable to obtain any information about homosexual practices during my time there. In line with the stress on sameness, sexual intercourse between a man and a woman in Gerai is understood as an equal coming together of
fluids, pleasures, and life forces. The same stress also underlies beliefs about conception. Gerai people believe that repeated acts of intercourse between the same two people are necessary for conception, since this “prepares” the womb for pregnancy. The fetus is deemed to be created through the mingling of equal quantities of fluids and forces from both partners. Again, what is seen as important here is not the fusion of two different types of bodies (male and female) as in Western understandings; rather, Gerai people say, it is the similarity of the two bodies that allows procreation to occur. As someone put it to me bluntly: “If they were not the same, how could the fluids blend? It’s like coconut oil and water: they can’t mix!”

What needs to be stressed here is that both sexual intercourse and conception are viewed as involving a mingling of similar bodily fluids, forces, and so on, rather than as the penetration of one body by another with a parallel propulsion of substances from one (male) body only into the other, very different (female) one. What Gerai accounts of both sexual intercourse and conception stress are tropes of identity, mingling, balance, and reciprocity. In this context it is worth noting that many Gerai people were puzzled by the idea of gender-specific “medicine to prevent conception”—such as the injectable or oral contraceptives promoted by state-run health clinics in the area. Many believed that, because both partners play the same role in conception, it should not matter whether husband or wife received such medicine (and indeed, I knew of cases where husbands had taken oral contraceptives meant for their wives). This suggests that such contraceptive regimes also serve (like the practice of rape) to reinscribe sex difference between men and women (see also Tsing 1993, 104–20). . .

Gender difference in Gerai, then, is not predicated on the character of one’s body, and especially of one’s genitalia as in many Western contexts. Rather, it is understood as constituted in the differential capacity to perform certain kinds of work, a capacity assigned long before one’s bodily being takes shape. In this respect it is important to note that Gerai ontology rests on a belief in predestination, in things being as they should (see Helliwell 1995). In this understanding, any individual’s semongan is linked in multifarious and unknowable ways to the cosmic order, to the “life” of the universe as a whole. Thus the new fetus is predestined to become someone “fitted” to carry out either men’s work or women’s work as part of the maintenance of
a universal balance. Bodies with the appropriate characteristics—internal or external genitalia, presence or absence of breasts, and so on—then develop in line with this prior destiny. At first sight this may not seem enormously different from Western conceptions of gender, but the difference is in fact profound. While, for Westerners, genitalia, as significant of one’s role in the procreative process, are absolutely fundamental in determining one’s identity, in Gerai the work that one performs is seen as fundamental, and genitalia along with other bodily characteristics, are relegated to a kind of secondary, derivative function.

Gerai understandings of gender were made quite clear through circumstances surrounding my own gender classification while in the community. Gerai people remained very uncertain about my gender for some time after I arrived in the community because (as they later told me) “I did not...walk like a woman, with arms held out from the body and hips slightly swaying; I was ‘brave’ trekking from village to village through the jungle on my own; I had bony kneecaps; I did not know how to tie a sarong in the appropriate way for women; I was tall” (Helliwell 1993, 260). This was despite the fact that people in the community knew from my first few days with them both that I had breasts (this was obvious when the sarong that I wore clung to my body while I bathed in the river) and that I had a vulva rather than a penis and testicles (this was obvious from my trips to defecate or urinate in the small stream used for that purpose, when literally dozens of people would line the banks to observe whether I performed these functions differently from them). As someone said to me at a later point, “Yes, I saw that you had a vulva, but I thought that Western men might be different.” My eventual, more definitive classification as a woman occurred...as I learned to distinguish types of rice and their uses, I became more and more of a woman (as I realized later), since this knowledge—including the magic that goes with it—is understood by Gerai people as foundational to femininity.

...Gerai people talk of two kinds of work as defining a woman: the selection and storage of rice seed and the bearing of children. But the first of these is viewed as prior, logically as well as chronologically. People are quite clear that in the womb either “someone who can cut down the large trees for a ricefield is made, or someone who can select and store rice.” When I asked if it was not more important whether or not someone could bear a child, it was pointed out to me that many women do not bear children (there is a high rate of infertility in the community), but all women have the knowledge to select and store rice seed. In fact, at the level of the rice group the two activities of “growing” rice and “growing” children are inseparable: a rice group produces rice in order to raise healthy children, and it produces children so that they can in turn produce the rice that will sustain the group once their parents are old and frail (Helliwell, forthcoming). For this reason, any Gerai couple unable to give birth to a child of their own will adopt one, usually from a group related by kinship. The two activities of growing rice and growing children are constantly talked about together, and the same imagery is used to describe the development of a woman’s pregnancy and the development of rice grains on the plant.

Gerai, then, lacks the stress on bodily—and especially genital—dimorphism that most feminist accounts of rape assume. Indeed, the reproductive organs themselves are not seen as “sexed.” In a sense it is problematic even to use the English categories woman and man when writing of this community, since these terms are saturated with assumptions concerning the priority of biological (read, bodily) difference. In the Gerai context, it would be more accurate to deal with the categories of, on the one hand, “those responsible for rice selection and storage” and, on the other, “those responsible for cutting down the large trees to make a ricefield.” There is no discursive space in Gerai for the distinction between an active, aggressive, penetrating male sexual organ (and sexuality) and a passive, vulnerable, female one. Indeed, sexual intercourse
in Gerai is understood by both men and women to stem from mutual “need” on the part of the two partners; without such need, people say, sexual intercourse cannot occur, because the requisite balance is lacking. . . . the sexual act is understood as preeminently mutual in its character, including in its initiation. The idea of having sex with someone who does not need you to have sex with them—and so the idea of coercing someone into sex—is thus almost unthinkable to Gerai people. In addition, informants asserted that any such action would destroy the individual’s spiritual balance and that of his or her rice group and bring calamity to the group as a whole.  

In this context, a Gerai man’s astonished and horrified question “How can a penis be taken into a vagina if a woman doesn’t want it?” has a meaning very different from that of the same statement uttered by a man in the West. In the West, notions of radical difference between men and women—incorporating representations of normative male sexuality as active and aggressive, normative female sexuality as passive and vulnerable, and human relationships (including acts of sexual intercourse) as occurring between independent, potentially hostile, agents—would render such a statement at best naive, at worst misogynist. In Gerai, however, the stress on identity between men and women and on the sexual act as predicated on mutuality validates such a statement as one of straightforward incomprehension (and it should be noted that I heard similar statements from women). In Gerai, however, the stress on identity between men and women and on the sexual act as predicated on mutuality validates such a statement as one of straightforward incomprehension (and it should be noted that I heard similar statements from women). In the Gerai context, the penis, or male genitalia in general, is not admired, feared, or envied. . . . In fact, Gerai people see men’s sexual organs as more vulnerable than women’s for the simple reason that they are outside the body, while women’s are inside. This reflects Gerai understandings of “inside” as representing safety and belonging, while “outside” is a place of strangers and danger, and it is linked to the notion of men as braver than women.  

In addition, Gerai people say, because the penis is “taken into” another body, it is theoretically at greater risk during the sexual act than the vagina. This contrasts, again, quite markedly with Western understandings, where women’s sexual organs are constantly depicted as more vulnerable during the sexual act—as liable to be hurt, despoiled, and so on (some men’s anxieties about vagina dentata not withstanding). In Gerai a penis is “only a penis”: neither a marker of dimorphism between men and women in general nor, in its essence, any different from a vagina.

**Conclusions**

With this background, I return now to the case with which I began this article—and, particularly, to the great differences between my response to this case and that of the Gerai woman concerned. On the basis of my own cultural assumptions concerning the differences—and particularly the different sexual characters—of men and women, I am inclined (as this case showed me) to read any attempt by a man to climb into a woman’s bed in the night without her explicit consent as necessarily carrying the threat of sexual coercion and brutalization. The Gerai woman, in contrast, has no fear of coerced sexual intercourse when awakened in the dark by a man. She has no such fear because in the Gerai context . . . women’s sexuality and bodies are no less aggressive and no more vulnerable than men’s.

In fact, in the case in question, the intruding man did expect to have intercourse with the woman. He claimed that the woman had already agreed to this through her acceptance of his initiatory gifts of soap. The woman, however, while privately agreeing that she had accepted such gifts, claimed that no formal agreement had yet been reached. Her anger, then, did not stem from any belief that the man had attempted to sexually coerce her (“How would he be able to do such a thing?”). Because the term “to be quiet” is often used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse in Gerai, she saw the man’s exhortation that she “be quiet” as simply an invitation to engage in sex with him, rather than the implicit threat that I read it to be. Instead, her anger stemmed from her conviction that the correct protocols had not been followed,
that the man ought to have spoken with her rather than taking her acceptance of the soap as an unequivocal expression of assent. She was, as she put it, letting him know that “you have sexual relations together when you talk together. Sexual relations cannot be quiet.”23

Yet, this should not be taken to mean that the practice of rape is simply a product of discourse: that brutality toward women is restricted to societies containing particular, dimorphic representations of male and female sexuality and that we simply need to change the discourse in order to eradicate such practices.24 Nor is it to suggest that a society in which rape is unthinkable is for that reason to be preferred to Western societies. To adopt such a position would be still to view the entire world through a sexualized Western lens.

In order to understand the practice of rape in countries like Australia and the United States, then—and so to work effectively for its eradication there—feminists in these countries must begin to relinquish some of our most ingrained presumptions concerning difference between men and women and, particularly, concerning men’s genitalia and sexuality as inherently brutalizing and penetrative and women’s genitalia and sexuality as inherently vulnerable and subject to brutalization. Instead, we must begin to explore the ways rape itself produces such experiences of masculinity and femininity and so inscribes sexual difference onto our bodies.

NOTES

1. Among “radical” feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon this belief reaches its most extreme version, in which all sexual intercourse between a man and a woman is viewed as akin to rape (Dworkin 1987; MacKinnon 1989a, 1989b).

2. Leacock 1978 and Bell 1983 are well-known examples. Sanday 1990a and Marcus 1992 are more recent examples, on Minangkabau and Turkish society, respectively.

3. See Laqueur 1990 for a historical account of this process.

4. On the equation of body and person within Western (especially feminist) thought, see Moore 1994.

5. See Plaza 1980: “[Rape] is very sexual in the sense that [it] is frequently a sexual activity, but especially in the sense that it opposes men and women: it is social sexing which is latent in rape . . . Rape is sexual essentially because it rests on the very social difference between the sexes” (31).

6. The material on male prison inmates is particularly revealing in this respect. As an article by Stephen Donaldson, a former prisoner and the president of the U.S. advocacy group Stop Prisoner Rape, makes clear, “hooking up” with another prisoner is the best way for a prisoner to avoid sexual assaults, particularly gang rapes. Hooking up involves entering a sexual liaison with a senior partner (“jocker,” “man,” “pitcher,” “daddy”) in exchange for protection. In this arrangement, the rules are clear: the junior partner gives up his autonomy and comes under the authority of the senior partner; he is often expected by the senior partner to be as feminine in appearance and behavior as possible, including shaving his legs, growing long hair, using a feminine nickname, and performing work perceived as feminine (laundry, cell cleaning, giving backrubs, etc.) (Donaldson 1996, 17, 20). See also the extract from Jack Abbott’s prison letters in Halperin 1993 (424–25).

7. While I am primarily concerned here with the feminist literature (believing that it contains by far the most useful and insightful work on rape), it needs to be noted that many other (nonfeminist) writers also believe rape to be universal. See, e.g., Ellis 1989; Palmer 1989.

8. For listings of “rape-prone” societies, see Minturn, Grosse, and Haider 1969; Sanday 1981.

9. I carried out anthropological fieldwork in Gerai from March 1985 to February 1986 and from June 1986 to January 1987. The fieldwork was funded by an Australian National University Ph.D. scholarship and carried out under the sponsorship of Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia. At the time that I was conducting my research a number of phenomena were beginning to have an impact on the community—these had the potential to effect massive changes in the areas of life discussed in this article. These phenomena included the arrival of a Malaysian timber company in the Gerai region and the increasing frequency of visits by Malay, Bugis, Chinese, and Batak timber workers.
to the community; the arrival of two American fundamentalist Protestant missionary families to live and proselytize in the community; and the establishment of a Catholic primary school in Gerai, resulting in a growing tendency among parents to send their children (both male and female) to attend Catholic secondary school in a large coastal town several days' journey away.

10. The Wana, as described by Jane Atkinson (1990), provide an excellent example of a society that emphasizes sameness. Emily Martin points out that the explicit Western opposition between the “natures” of men and women is assumed to occur even at the level of the cell, with biologists commonly speaking of the egg as passive and immobile and the sperm as active and aggressive even though recent research indicates that these descriptions are erroneous and that they have led biologists to misunderstand the fertilization process (1991). See also Lloyd 1984 for an excellent account of how (often latent) conceptions of men and women as having opposed characteristics are entrenched in the history of Western philosophical thought.

11. The nurture-need dynamic (that I elsewhere refer to as the “need-share dynamic”) is central to Gerai sociality. Need for others is expressed through nurturing them; such expression is the primary mark of a “good” as opposed to a “bad” person. See Helliwell (forthcoming) for a detailed discussion.

12. In this respect, Gerai is very different from, e.g., Australia or the United States, where, as Michelle Rosaldo has pointed out, aggression is linked to success, and women’s constitution as lacking aggression is thus an important element of their subordination (1980b, 416; see also Myers 1988, 600).

13. See Helliwell 1996, 142–43, for an example of a “violent” altercation between husband and wife.

14. I have noted elsewhere that the inside-outside distinction is a central one within this culture (Helliwell 1996).

15. While the Gerai stress on the sameness of men’s and women’s sexual organs seems, on the face of it, to be very similar to the situation in Renaissance Europe as described by Laqueur 1990, it is profoundly different in at least one respect: in Gerai, women’s organs are not seen as emasculated versions of men’s—“female penises”—as they were in Renaissance Europe. This is clearly linked to the fact that, in Gerai, as we have already seen, people are not synonymous with men, and women are not relegated to positions of emasculation or abjection, as was the case in Renaissance Europe.

16. In this respect Gerai is similar to a number of other peoples in this region (e.g., Wana, Ilongot), for whom difference between men and women is also seen as primarily a matter of the different kinds of work that each performs.

17. In Gerai, pregnancy and birth are seen not as semimystical “natural” processes, as they are for many Westerners, but simply as forms of work, linked very closely to the work of rice production.

18. Sanday 1986 makes a similar point about the absence of rape among the Minangkabau. See Helliwell (forthcoming) for a discussion of the different kinds of bad fate that can afflict a group through the actions of its individual members.

19. In Gerai, as in nearby Minangkabau (Sanday 1986), vulnerability is respected and valued rather than despised.

20. The man left the community on the night that this event occurred and went to stay for several months at a nearby timber camp. Community consensus—including the view of the woman concerned—was that he left because he was ashamed and distressed, not only as a result of having been sexually rejected by someone with whom he thought he had established a relationship but also because his adulterous behavior had become public, and he wished to avoid an airing of the details in a community moot. Consequently, I was unable to speak to him about the case. However, I did speak to several of his close male kin (including his married son), who put his point of view to me.

21. The woman in this particular case was considerably younger than the man (in fact, a member of the next generation). In such cases of considerable age disparity between sexual partners, the older partner (whether male or female) is expected to pay a fine in the form of small gifts to the younger partner, both to initiate the liaison and to enable its continuance. Such a fine rectifies any spiritual imbalance that may result from the age imbalance and hence makes it safe for the relationship to proceed. Contrary to standard Western assumptions, older women appear to pay such fines to younger men as often as older men pay them to younger women (although it was very difficult to obtain reliable data on this question, since most such liaisons are adulterous and therefore highly secretive).
While not significant in terms of value (women usually receive such things as soap and shampoo, while men receive tobacco or cigarettes), these gifts are crucial in their role of “rebalancing” the relationship. It would be entirely erroneous to subsume this practice under the rubric of “prostitution.”

22. Because Gerai adults usually sleep surrounded by their children, and with other adults less than a meter or two away (although the latter are usually inside different mosquito nets), sexual intercourse is almost always carried out very quietly.

23. In claiming that “sexual relations cannot be quiet,” the woman was playing on the expression “be quiet” (meaning to have sexual intercourse) to make the point that while adulterous sex may need to be even “quieter” than legitimate sex, it should not be so “quiet” as to preclude dialogue between the two partners. Implicit here is the notion that in the absence of such dialogue, sex will lack the requisite mutuality.

24. Foucault, e.g., once suggested (in a debate in French reprinted in La Folie Encerclée [see Plaza 1980]) that an effective way to deal with rape would be to decriminalize it in order to “desexualize” it. For feminist critiques of his suggestion, see Plaza 1980; de Lauretis 1987; Woodhull 1988.

REFERENCES


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Introduction to Reading 11

Lynda Newland, a sociologist at the University of the South Pacific, Fiji, conducted participant observation among the Sundanese people of West Java, Indonesia. Here, the Sundanese view Islam as a primary marker of their identity. Female and male circumcision is among a number of rituals that are defined as essential to transforming a child into a socially acceptable member of the Sundanese community. This article explores the nature and context of female circumcision in particular. Newland argues that Western condemnation of all forms of female circumcision is problematic because practices vary widely and include types that pose no significant disbenefits for girls and women.

1. Discuss the gender differences and similarities between the Sundanese rituals that transform a child into a member of the community.

2. What is the zero tolerance campaign and why is Newland critical of it?

3. What is colonialism and how has colonial history affected the Sundanese view of Westerners?
It was another early morning of participant-observation fieldwork among the Sundanese in the tea plantations of West Java, Indonesia. I accompanied my reluctant midwife-informant to a tiny bamboo house on a round of 7-month pregnancy rituals. The usual elements, including the seven flowers in a bowl of water, a bowl of uncooked rice with Rp 1000 money and an egg on top of it, were set out in front of us (Newland, 2001). As we sat on the floor waiting for relevant parties to arrive, the midwife apologetically said something to me in Sundanese that I did not understand. I nodded and waited for the pregnant woman to enter. Instead, a woman brought out a tiny swaddled baby. While praying in Arabic, the midwife drew a length of cotton thread through turmeric to color it gold and then loosened the baby’s swaddling to reveal the little girl’s genitals. Shocked, I realized I was not at a 7-month pregnancy ritual but a baby girl’s circumcision.

In this ritual as conducted by this midwife, no knife was used—just a needle. There was no significant bloodletting. The midwife simply used the needle to scrape the clitoral area. When the baby started to cry, she stopped, pushed the needle through a banana leaf and put it in the flower water. Still praying, she tied gold thread around the baby’s neck and then tied the yellowed cotton around the baby’s left wrist, the mother’s right wrist, the baby’s right leg, and finally the right leg of a chicken. Then she held the chicken above the baby’s head and drew three circles in the air. Finally, she gave the chicken to the grandmother with a handful of rice, and the grandmother left the room. This, I was to learn, was the gnahuripan or ritual blessing that tied souls into and between mother, child, and chicken, but it was the circumcision that impressed itself most upon me. Having had no idea that female circumcision was practised in West Java, it took me some time to accept what I had witnessed.

At the same time as my fieldwork experiences in the mid-1990s, the move to eradicate female circumcision at the international level had escalated to become a major platform for improving the rights of women and girls. At the national level, the Indonesian government had already ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 (Budiharsana, Amaliah, Utomo, & Erwinia, 2003; Moore & Rompies, 2004). Although this Convention did not specifically isolate practices of circumcision as oppositional to the rights of the child, UNICEF has since counted the criminalisation of female genital mutilation in sub-Saharan Africa as one of its successes in terms of targeting child survival and development (UNICEF, n.d.).

In 1995, the United Nations declared female circumcision a violation of women’s rights on the strength of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (UNESCO, 2005). The United States Congress later supported this by refusing financial assistance to countries where the government has not taken steps to eradicate female circumcision (Budiharsana et al., 2003). By 1998, a United Nations campaign was launched to eradicate female circumcision worldwide, which many United Nations organisations actively supported (Estabrooks, 2000; UNFPA, 1996; UNHCHR 1994, 1995, 2003). As a result, female circumcision became a highly politicised practice associated with violence against women and...
girls (sometimes even with torture) or, at the very least, was described as a harmful practice (see, for instance, UNESCO, 1995).

Although many UN documents do not differentiate between the different types of circumcision practised, the WHO has distinguished four ‘types’ and two extra categories in the following way:

- Type I—excision of the prepuce, with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris;
- Type II—excision of the clitoris with partial or total excision of the labia minora;
- Type III—excision of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening (infibulation);
- Type IV—pricking, piercing or incising of the clitoris and/or labia; stretching of the clitoris and/or labia; cauterization by burning of the clitoris and surrounding tissue;
- scraping of tissue surrounding the vaginal orifice (angurya cuts) or cutting of the vagina (gishiri cuts);
- introduction of corrosive substances or herbs into the vagina to cause bleeding or for the purpose of tightening or narrowing it; and any other procedure that falls under the definition given above (WHO, 2000).

While the practices vary widely, the term ‘female genital mutilation’ is often used as a gloss for all of them. Strategically, the term provides an emotional force behind a policy of zero tolerance towards any cutting that may occur in the female genital area, other than genital surgery (whether for medical reasons or for sexual reassignment). The label also carries the assumptions that all female circumcision practices intentionally limit female sexual pleasure in order to control women, have a detrimental effect on women’s health, and, because they harm women and girls, must be eradicated regardless of the extent of the procedure or the context in which they occur. Moreover, the policy of zero tolerance framed by the UN and advocated for adoption by member states suggests that the educated first world (from which this term emerged) has the responsibility to ‘save’ third world women—without recourse to their very different histories and ‘manifestations of differently structured desires’ (Abu Lughod, 2002:783; Walley, 1997; Wood, 2001).

Yet, although many of these documents assume all female genital mutilation results in health issues and therefore harm to women’s sexuality, studies conducted in Indonesia suggest there are no significant health risks related to female circumcision and that infection and bleeding seem to be more likely to result from male circumcision than from female circumcision (Darwin, Faturochman, Ptnanti, Purwatiningshih, & Octaviatie, 2002), indicating that these practices are probably less harmful to women than they are to men. If the issue of harm is questionable, the stereotype that female circumcision impairs sexual enjoyment is also undermined by an idea that the practice enhances sexual enjoyment, which seems to be widespread throughout Java (Berninghausen & Kerstan, 1992; Darwin et al., 2002). While the impact of Indonesian forms of circumcision on sexual pleasure cannot be measured, such a response calls dominant and broadly Western notions of sexual embodiment into question.

Although many of the assumptions regarding sexual embodiment and the ‘saving’ of third world women that are implicit in this term have since been deconstructed (e.g., Bell, 2005; Parker, 1999; Walley, 1997), the term, ‘female genital mutilation,’ has retained emotive force and currency at United Nations levels, serving to justify the universalisation of zero tolerance policies. Despite ethnographic work in this area (e.g., Abusharaf, 2001; Boddy, 1989), one of the major aspects that tends to be overlooked is the variable contexts in which female circumcision occurs. In this article, I explore some of these issues in relation to my own fieldwork experiences to argue against the notion that female circumcision is universally harmful to women and girls because it does not recognise the diversity of circumcision practices and does not allow for the fact that female circumcision in regions such as West Java is often part of an elaborated process of socialisation in which a child is embedded within a
community. In this regard, I argue that such processes are not necessarily oppressive to women and girls in and of themselves. Nor are they necessarily violent. Rather, they are a representation of parental responsibility towards the child.

THE MAKING OF PERSONS

Children are highly valued in Sundanese society, not only as agricultural labour in a peasant society (as theorised in the ‘value of children’ literature in the 1970s and early 1980s, e.g., Nag, White, & Peet, 1978; Hull, 1977), but in a rich cosmology where children link preceding generations with those yet to come. In the simplest sense, having children bestows the status of adulthood on the parents in the titles of *Ibu* and *Bapak* (literally ‘mother’ and ‘father’ with usage similar to ‘Mrs.’ and ‘Mr.’). Children are also closely associated with both material and non-material forms of wealth and well-being as evident in the Indonesia-wide saying, ‘*banyak anak, banyak rezeki*’ or ‘many children, much fortune.’

With the high value of children comes the responsibility of giving newborn children a defined position in the religious community that deeply roots them into their social world, away from the world of spirits (cf. Geertz, 1961; Jaspan & Hill, 1987). A child’s entry into this world is conceptualised as the beginning of a process of affirmation of a destined personhood, although this personhood will not be complete until after death at Judgement Day.

Thus, the rituals around birth are replete with ideas about how to imbue the child with the values of the preceding generation that will maintain the quality of the family vertically through the generations as well as enhancing horizontal communal relationships.

To this end, female circumcision is performed in one of a series of birth rituals which include the 7-month pregnancy ritual (*tingkeban*), the burial of the placenta, the process of naming, a Muslim *marhaba* when the umbilical stub falls off the child, piercing the ears of girls, the animal sacrifice (*aqiqah*), the tying of the mother’s and child’s spirits (*ngahuripan*), and the haircutting ritual (*cukuran*). The parents participate in the separation of the baby from its companion spirits in the womb, in shaping the baby’s character towards desirable gender values and a fortunate future, and in introducing the baby to the values of the Muslim community. While male circumcisions are performed, when the boy is around 7 years old and are therefore considered part of the *rite-de-pasage* to adulthood, female circumcision has become part of the rituals around birth. In this section, then, I explore some of these rituals to show the way in which circumcision at birth or during childhood is embedded in ideas about the creation of a moral person, which, in this community, means to be socialised into the values of a local version of Islam.

The responsibility of the parent in appropriately socialising the child begins from the 7-month pregnancy ritual (*tingkeban*). Although primarily intended to aid the woman in experiencing a smooth or fluid birth, the *tingkeban* is also an attempt to counter some of the physical and moral faults of the parents that may be later transmitted to the baby. During pregnancy, for instance, *lahir* (outside) and *batin* (inside) mirror each other in such a way that, if a pregnant woman sees a deformed person, the child will also be deformed.

In an acknowledgement of gender difference, girl’s ears are pierced while they are babies. Although there is no religious function attributed to piercing, several informants noted that it was *haram* (forbidden) or in the very least *jelek* (ugly, awful) if a boy’s ears are pierced. One village midwife also made a brief and intriguing association between the piercing of ears and female circumcision, where the first makes holes in the ears with sharpened studs and the second opens the flesh around the vagina. While both effectively reinscribe the baby’s sexual destiny onto her body, her first earrings of tiny gold studs predict a lifetime of receiving gold jewellery, from sleepers (looped earrings) to necklaces and rings. Gold jewellery is significant in showing the financial status of the household and gold is also associated with fortune and fertility.
The village midwives also say that through female circumcision and the other rituals around birth the child can inherit desirable characteristics from ritual objects. Rice, eggs, needles, thread, flowered water, and oil are often used. While these elements together attract certain spirits, repel others, and, as discussed above, tie the child’s soul into his or her body, to the mother’s soul, and to the home (see Newland, 1999, 2001, 2002b), they may also represent desirable qualities that need to be transmitted to the child. For example, in explaining the symbolism of the tingkeban (or pregnancy ritual), one midwife claimed that the roundness of the egg is associated with the roundness of thought (so the child would not be easily influenced by malevolent forces); the needle’s sharpness is associated with sharpness of memory and cleverness, and the thread represents its association with wisdom and judgement. . . . The fact that this transference of qualities is called an inheritance points to the way each child is born into a highly structured position with mutual obligations within the vertical relationships of the generations.

Already bound to women (and particularly to the lineage of its mother) through blood and milk, the child must also be bound to the family and then to the wider community. This is done with the three main selamatan or ritual feasts: the marhaba after the child’s umbilical stub drop off, in the goat sacrifice (aqiqah), and the hair-cutting ritual (cukuran). . . .

The last of the selamatan is performed at 40 days after the birth as this is the time both mother and baby are considered out of danger. This selamatan is called the cukuran or ‘the cutting’ because several of the baby’s locks of hair are cut. This ritual is meant formally to introduce the baby to the male community for the first time. The men pray and sing while the father carries the baby to the centre. Three different men then cut the child’s hair and, between each cut, they dip the scissors in a bowl of water, containing flowers of seven colours. The symbolic resonances between cutting hair, prayers, and circumcision are significant. Cutting the hair is a symbol of submission to the Covenant and a sacrifice of individuality in order to conform to the community’s values. In the same way, circumcision and its cutting of flesh, the cutting and covering of hair, the sacrifice of chicken and goats, blood from humans, chickens and goats all refer to the same set of ideas about submission to Allah and the Muslim community.

These selamatan place both male and female circumcision in a context where babies must be made socially acceptable, by undergoing both a physical and ritual separation from the mother’s body and spirit in order to be incorporated into the broader Muslim community. Clearly, none of these rituals are intended to violate the child. In this context, female circumcision is perceived as roughly equal to ear piercing in its physical effects, but absolutely essential to the embodiment of Islam.

**FEMALE CIRCUMCISION**

When I asked the Sundanese villagers why women should be circumcised, many were quite shocked that women should go uncircumcised. For example, Ibu Acih replied, ‘If you’re Muslim you must be circumcised, because circumcision is the direction given by Islam. If you’re outside Islam, it’s not necessary to be circumcised. If children aren’t circumcised, they’re not permitted to participate in the prayers at the mosque.’ Likewise Imas responded, ‘Circumcision is the identifying feature of Islam. Boys must be circumcised, girls also. The old people said circumcision is for throwing away what’s dirty. I often heard that at pengajian [meetings for recitation of the Qur’an].’ For them as for the ulama (religious leaders), circumcision positions the child in the Muslim community by physically tracing Islamic identity on to the body. It is also an expression of the idea that both men and women are considered equal before Allah.

For boys, circumcision occurs when they reach the age of seven. A specialist removes the foreskin, and then the boy sits on a chair greeting guests. The mother and female relatives cook a feast that includes fish, chicken, and cakes.
While boys have a public circumcision, the timing of a girl's circumcision occurs shortly after childbirth and therefore is a quiet affair, entailing the presence of a midwife, mother and child. The exact timing varies according to the midwife: one midwife performed circumcisions on babies between 7 and 15 days old and a second circumcised girls from between 40 days and 2 months. The extent of the practice also seems to depend on the midwife. Ma Eha, for instance, merely scratches the clitoral area with a needle. By contrast, Ma Juju scoffed at this practice:

* A girl is circumcised by knife. If it's by a needle, she will get sick. With a knife, you pry off a little. For Muslims, if they're not circumcised, they're not allowed to go into a mosque.

The amount of flesh cut is described as a *mata holang*, the size a grain of rice and white, unlike the surrounding flesh.

Yet another midwife, Ayah Enjum, one of the rare males who served the poorer villages, espoused another view, saying that: ‘Women can be circumcised, but they don’t have to be. But if they’re not circumcised they must have a ritual ablation when they reach adulthood.’ He also interpreted circumcision fairly broadly, saying: ‘If you cut the umbilical cord while reciting the confession of faith, it’s the same as being circumcised with the confession of faith. Girls whose birth I assist shouldn’t be circumcised because when I cut their umbilical cord, the baby becomes a Muslim straight away.’ Here, circumcision is displaced through a visual metaphor where the cutting of the umbilical cord is a conscious analogy for the cutting of the clitoral area. What matters for Ayah Enjum is that the confession of faith has been and an organ has been cut, not the excision of a specific organ or the removal of any flesh.

Clearly, all the village midwives see some sort of actual or symbolic female circumcision as necessary, although the extent of the practice varies significantly. Further, throughout their explanations, female circumcision is explained in relation to Islam. Despite arguments that female circumcision is cultural rather than religious, this is clearly not how Muslim Sundanese experience the embodiment of their religion. Circumcision is considered to inscribe the major distinction between Muslim and heathen: as indicated above, only the circumcised may enter a mosque to pray.

Circumcision for boys and girls is also one of several measures strongly associated with the notion of cleanliness or purification. The *ulama*, Bapak Syamsudin, described circumcision to me this way:

* Circumcision is included in the five types of cleanliness.

Circumcision originated from the word *khotana*, that is, throwing away the bud, so that the defiling filth that sits in the bud is thrown away. So circumcision is cleansing. . . [The second type of cleanliness is] shaving the armpits. The third type is cutting finger and toenails, the fourth is shaving the genitals, and the fifth is shaving the moustache. With shaving the genitals, [cleanliness] is assured for 40 days.

The notion that circumcision was the most important in a range of cleansing acts to remove dirt or filth is commonly emphasized. Indeed, both men and women are barred from the mosque when considered polluted by semen or menstrual blood which are considered dirty and which cancel out the effect of prayers. From this perspective, Islam treats both men and women equally in that both must rid the ‘defiling filth’ from their bodies in order to come before Allah.

. . . (C)ircumcision does not limit women more than men nor is it used to mark gender difference but rather it reinforces the idea that both sexes can attain equal purity. Nor is circumcision in this context intended to control female sexuality. On the contrary Bapak Symasudin, an *ulama* for the Muslim organisation, Persis, explained:

* Rasulullah [Mohammed] governed his wives should be circumcised. Circumcision for women is the getting rid of ‘the eye of holang’ or a little bit inside the vagina. Circumcision for women is connected with [their] sexual enjoyment. So for circumcision, there is sexual enjoyment, cleanliness, and performance of acts of devotion.
As previously mentioned, the notion that female circumcision enhances sexual enjoyment seems to be widespread throughout Java (Berninghausen & Kerstan, 1992; Darwin et al., 2002). Certainly, women do not perceive female circumcision as harming their sexual desire. In my own fieldwork, Ma Eha who had married twice noted that:

_All women must marry. I know the reason for marriage. I wanted it because Allah gave me passion. The religious leader says that there are many more passionate women than men. Women’s desire is nine while men’s is one, so women’s is bigger._

Another study also noted that many of their informants in various locations throughout Indonesia associated female circumcision with the hadith or saying where Mohammad tells the circumciser to ‘Cut off only the foreskin . . . and do not cut off deeply . . . for this is brighter for the face (of the girl) and more favourable with the husband’ (cited in Budiharsana et al., 2003, p. 8). Even if such ideas play into Muslim notions that the wife should be sexually available to her husband, they show that this availability does not entail the lack of sexual pleasure on her part.

In this way, female circumcision is not perceived as a physically or emotionally harmful act against women and girls. While some argue that girls are unable to give or refuse their consent or even that it is a form of child abuse (e.g., Family Law Council, 1994), in this region circumcision is considered a parental duty through which to position their child in the ummat or Muslim community. To refuse to do this would amount to neglect of parental responsibilities.

In this light, suggestions that the practice may have increased because of Islamic revivalism (Hull & Budiharsana, 2001) are difficult to substantiate, given that in West Java the practice had remained unquestioned and unproblematic during my fieldwork in the mid-1990s. From my own informants, it seemed that female circumcision had been practised throughout the aging midwives’ careers and probably for many generations.

__ZERO TOLERANCE__

Despite the fact that the United Nations had launched a campaign to eradicate female circumcision worldwide in 1998, a report notes that in the year 2000: ‘public awareness is low. The subject is not addressed in schools and rarely in the media’ (United States Department of State, 2001). In Indonesia, various arrangements were made to commit the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and the Ministry of Religion to study religious teachings that obstruct women’s rights and the agreement of the National Ulama’s Council had been given to eliminate female circumcision in stages (United States Department of State, 2001). Yet, little more seems to have been done until the government campaign of zero tolerance towards female circumcision was finally launched in January 2003, which was also met with a relaxed attitude (Kompas, 2004). It seems that there was little inclination among the citizenry to support such campaigns. If this is the case, then the concerns about female circumcision are perceived at state level to be foreign and inappropriate for the vast Muslim population in Indonesia.

However, one of the effects of the campaign of zero tolerance towards female circumcision seems to have resulted in the medicalisation of the practice (despite the WHO recommendation against it in 1982), which has ironically led to more invasive procedures being performed (Budiharsana et al., 2003). Although the hospitals were considered more hygienic places in which to conduct the procedure, the medical practice involved the use of scissors to cut away more of the genital tissue than the village midwives ever removed using needles and penknives (Budiharsana et al., 2003; Moore & Rompies, 2004). Moreover, the hospital clinic midwives were not trained by the Health Department in such procedures but relied on information given by senior staff or village midwives (Budiharsana et al., 2003). Thus, in 2004, female circumcision was being offered as part of a package of surgical procedures performed in hospitals for just-born girls. Girls could be vaccinated, have their ears pierced and be circumcised at the same time for
prices between Rp 15,000 and Rp 95,000 depending on the hospital (Moore & Rompies, 2004). The Indonesian health authorities announced a ban on medics (presumably meaning the clinic midwives) performing female circumcisions by mid-2005 in an effort to prevent hospitals from continuing the practice (News Unleashed, 2005), but the effect of this ban is not yet known.

Overall, the immediate response to the zero tolerance campaign continues to be muted. A report in the Indonesian newspaper, Kompas, in 2004 raised the concern that, if the ‘calm’ attitude of the government continued, Indonesia would be grouped with countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Yemen, and Malaysia, many of which practise more intrusive forms of female circumcision. To be grouped with such countries would give Indonesia a questionable reputation, but, on the other hand, enforcing zero tolerance would entail legislating against parents who take their girl children out of the country to have them circumcised (Kompas, 2004). For many Indonesians, such a ruling would come as a shock, because taking their moral responsibilities as a parent seriously could lead to a confrontation with the law. Yet, for the Sundanese in West Java, there is no correspondence between such arguments for zero tolerance and the values in which female circumcision is locally embedded. Instead, such legislation criminalises parents if they proceed with any type of female circumcision, and, if enacted, could cause harm greater to the child than the practice of female circumcision through removing and imprisoning parents.5

During the 1990s when I conducted fieldwork, the Sundanese had an ambivalent relationship with the state as institutionalised and led by the Suharto regime. In its early years, the regime had depoliticised Islamic parties and distanced itself from Muslim influence in its pursuit of development. Moreover, state programs such as the family planning campaign, which dictated that ‘Dua anak cukup’ (‘Two children are enough’), were widely perceived to be in contradiction with rural Sundanese values (Newland, 1999, 2002a). By 2003, there had been successive changes in government and successive problems with unrest in the provinces (e.g., East Timor, Aceh, Ambon, Kalimantan, and Irian Jaya). Given such upheavals, it would seem that any Indonesian government would be wary of antagonising Muslims by overtly supporting and legislating zero tolerance policies that might be perceived as anti-Islam in a country that hosts the largest number of Muslims anywhere in the world. Indeed, any policy that is perceived as a foreign imposition helps contribute to local stereotypes of the Western world as rich and corrupt. Because of Sundanese colonial history, the rural Sundanese in my fieldwork area continue to view Westerners with suspicion since, in their eyes, Westerners have the power to perpetuate new forms of colonialism. International law and international campaigns such as that regarding genital mutilation exacerbate such images, especially when they fail to understand the variety of practices that are glossed by labels such as female circumcision or female genital mutilation and the very different contexts in which they occur. Universalising prohibitions on female circumcision disregards the more immediate needs of women and their kin groups and thus may be interpreted as simply another imposition from outside.

While my fieldwork experiences shocked me at first, it quickly became clear that female circumcision was not performed with any intention of violence, abuse, or even harm towards girl children and did not seem to have any measurable effect on their lives. Instead, parents were fulfilling their obligations by circumcising boys and girls to conform to a moral order deeply identified with Islam and to position them appropriately in the Muslim community. In this context, zero tolerance policies towards female circumcision seem out of touch with the realities experienced at the grass-roots level.

NOTES

1. In local terms, if certain ritual procedures that separate the child from the ‘sibling’ spirits are not properly done, the child will suffer from deformities. Although never voiced, the suggestion seems to be...
that, having come from the spirit world (a notion which is itself under contestation from differing Muslim interpretations) the child must be grounded in the actual world to aid in the avoidance of infant death, which entails the child’s return to the spirit world.

2. Due to space considerations, not all of these rituals are discussed here, but an elaboration of them is available in Newland (1999).

3. While being born to a woman is a primary factor in kinship, kinship ties are further set by breastfeeding, as made evident by old ideas about cross-sex twins. Cross-sex twins are considered to be married (dijodohkan) in the womb. If the twins are separated at birth and breastfed by different mothers, they will be encouraged to marry in adulthood as they are considered a destined and ideal match (Newland, 1999).

4. Age at circumcision seems to vary throughout Indonesia. Two different research teams have since noted that the girl can be anywhere from roughly 7 days to 9 years according to the district they live in (Budiharsana et al., 2003; Darwin et al., 2002).

5. In other countries, parents have already faced such rulings. A case that came before the courts in France led to a Gambian mother being gaoled for having her daughters circumcised, despite having no other carer for her children (Pitt, 1993, p. 29).

REFERENCES


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**Introduction to Reading 12**

Wairimu Ngaruinya Njambi, a Kenyan-born sociologist, and William E. O’Brien offer an incisive account of the institution of woman-woman marriage as practiced in Kenya today. Based on in-depth interviews with Gĩkũyũ women married to other women, the authors argue for an extensive revision of scholarship on woman-woman marriage that reflects the situated, complex, and empowering nature of this tradition.

1. What are the major shortcomings of past studies of woman-woman marriage?
2. How are woman-woman marriages regarded in the Gĩkũyũ community today?
3. Why do the authors view woman-woman marriage as a mode of empowerment?

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**Revisiting
"Woman-Woman Marriage"

Notes on Gĩkũyũ Women

Wairimu Ngaruinya Njambi
and William E. O’Brien

**INTRODUCTION**

The practice of women marrying women is somewhat common in certain societies in West Africa, Southern Africa, East Africa, and the Sudan (O’Brien 1977). Yet, besides a total lack of discussion in the popular media, what is typically called woman-woman marriage is the subject of a very small body of academic literature.1 Early scholarship is limited to the margins of several colonial-era ethnographies such as those of Evans-Pritchard, Herskovits, and Leakey. . . . More recent work remains equally marginal. Precious few writings address woman-woman marriage practices exclusively (e.g., Amadiume 1987; Burton 1979; Krige 1974; Oboler 1980); within others the subject remains little more than a footnote (e.g., Davis and Whitten 1987; Mackenzie 1990; Okonjo 1992). Since O’Brien’s (1977) call for field research into woman-woman marriages more than two decades ago, there has been no study of Gĩkũyũ woman-woman marriages, and few studies anywhere else. Our study attempts to revive this dormant discourse in relation to the Gĩkũyũ.

Based on interviews with members of households containing woman-woman marriages, we attempt to provide images of this institution as practiced in central Kenya. Relying upon these women’s voices, we present these Gĩkũyũ woman-woman marriages in relation to major themes in the literature. . . . Our attention is on the ambiguities and flexibility inherent in women’s decision to marry women. In addition,

we point to the strong emotional bonds to one another expressed by these women, shedding critical light on the omissions of purely functionalist perceptions of woman-woman marriage relationships. We also challenge the generalized conceptualizations of women who initiate such marriages as “female husbands.” That term, used by Leakey and virtually all other authors on the topic, regardless of cultural context, imposes a “male” characterization upon a situation where none necessarily exists. Emphasizing a term such as “female husband” prompts sex-role presumptions that do not fit these Gĩkũyũ women, who bristle at the implied male-identification regarding their roles.

This study is based on interviews with women in eight households in a small village in Murangá District in central Kenya. This case study approach does not attempt to portray a generalized picture of woman-woman marriages, but relies upon the women’s situated words to explain why they have married women, allowing them to present their own illuminating perspectives (see Smith 1987). . . .

The Gĩkũyũ are the largest ethnic group in Kenya, generally occupying the administrative unit of Central Province. “Kikuyuland,” as it is commonly called, is bounded by Nairobi to the south and Mt. Kirinyaga (Mt. Kenya) to the north, the Rift Valley and Nyandarua Range (Aberdares) to the west, and the Mbeere Plain to the east. . . .

Most of the woman-woman marriage households in the study engaged in peasant farming for a living, dividing their agricultural production between cash crops and subsistence crops, a pattern typical of this rural setting. However, some of the women were engaged in other occupations including shop ownership, market trading of small commodities, and, in one case, matatu (mini bus) driving. The initiators of these relationships, who are called ahikania, were all landowners, and the households all had modest living standards similar to most others in the locality. Though the interviews took place in a rural setting, two of the subjects were residents of Nairobi, while another lived and worked in a nearby small urban center.

The majority of the ahikania were middle-aged at the time of marriage, and two were in their early 30s. All of the ahiki, the women who accepted the marriage offer, were between the ages of 20 and 30 when they were married. Education patterns of the subjects show that most of the initiators of the marriages were educated through the traditional Gĩkũyũ educational system of githomo gia ugikuyu: one had a high school education, one primary school. Almost all of the women who accepted the marriage offer had at least a primary school education. The wide range of age and education suggests to us that woman-woman marriage continues to be a relevant potential life-option for Gĩkũyũ women.

Kuhikania, the process of getting married, and uhiki, the marriage ceremony, takes place in the same manner for woman-woman marriages as with woman-man marriages. In fact, there is no separate term to differentiate a woman-woman marriage from a woman-man marriage. Even the term which describes the marriage initiator, muhikania, is used to describe a woman or a man. As woman-woman marriages are not sanctioned by the various Christian churches in the region, kuhikania and uhiki continue to be performed through customary guidelines. The woman seeking a marriage partner, the muhikania, announces, either through a kiama (a customary civic organization) or through her own effort, her desire to find a marriage partner, or muhiki. Once the word is out, interested women go to visit, and once a suitable partner is found the muhikania’s friends and family bring ruracio (gifts associated with uhiki) to those of the future wife and vice-versa. Uhiki takes place after this gift exchange and is performed with ceremonial blessings, termed irathimo, by elders of both families as the new wife moves into the muhikania’s house.

WOMAN-WOMAN: MARRIAGES AND FAMILY DEFINITIONS

While woman-woman marriage may be familiar to most anthropologists, at least in passing, the topic remains relatively obscure to most people
outside Africa. In family studies discourse, the topic is pushed to the extreme margins by an historical fixation on western nuclear families as a universal ideal. This normative presumption of nuclearity makes it very difficult for particular non-western family forms, such as the woman-woman marriages in this study, to be evaluated as anything but bizarre novelties. As Skolnick and Skolnick argue:

The assumption of universality has usually defined what is normal and natural both for research and therapy and has subtly influenced our thinking to regard deviations from the nuclear family as sick or perverse or immoral. (1989, 7)

...The Gikuyu woman-woman marriages we studied challenge this thinking on all counts. Not only are the adults involved in these marriages of the same sex, but also there may be more than two, and the form of the family is not necessarily permanent once a union is made, but may change periodically. Furthermore, men are often absent from such relationships, though they may be involved in married relationships as spouses of women who initiate woman-woman marriages.

One example of such a relationship in our study is Kûhi’s household. In this complex case, Kûhi (a woman) and Huta (a man) were originally married to each other. Later, they decided together that Huta would marry a second woman, Kara, creating a polygamous marriage. Later still, Kûhi entered into a woman-woman marriage with a woman named Wamba. Wamba came to that family as Kûhi’s marriage partner, and to assist in raising the children of that household. In this particular case, Wamba could have a sexual relationship with Huta (whom she also informally regarded as a husband), and was not restricted from having sexual relationships with other men outside their household. Later in her life, while still married to Kûhi, Wamba married a woman named Wambûi. The result is that this single household contains four marriages: two woman-man marriages and two woman-woman marriages. Such complex relationships do not break any “rules,” expectations, or ideals of woman-woman marriages, but are an accepted aspect of such relationships in Gikuyu contexts. . . .

The idea of same sex relationships has spurred discussion of the sexuality of women in such marriages. A few texts imply that there may be sexual involvement in these marriages. Herskovits, for example, suggested that Dahomey woman-woman marriages sometimes involved sexual relations between the women (1937). Davis and Whitten go so far as to state that the main issue in explaining these relationships generally is over whether reasons for such partnerships are in fact “homoerotic” or strictly socio-economic (1987, 87). While sexuality was not directly discussed in our interviews, we can glean from the experience that this dichotomy makes little sense.5

In our Gikuyu locale, women in these relationships did not talk about sexual involvement with one another, although some did indicate sharing the same bed at night. . . . Given the ambiguity in this Gikuyu context, one might borrow Obbo’s assertion regarding the Kamba of Kenya that while there may be no clear indication of sexual relations among women in these marriages, we simply cannot dismiss the possibility (1976). We agree with Carrier that this possibility has been too quickly dismissed by some authors, and suggest that the subject deserves more careful investigation (1980).

On the other side of the dichotomy, to suggest that such relationships are based solely on socio-economic factors like access to land and other resources or lineage ignores the close emotional ties experienced by these women. Such functionalist views have strongly influenced historical, and still-held stereotypes of African marriages generally. African family relations, compared to the privileged, western nuclear family form, are often portrayed as relatively primitive since they are presumed to be based on practical considerations alone, such as access to resources, as opposed to having a significant emotional aspect (e.g., Albert 1971; Ainsworth 1967; Beeson 1990; Kilbride and Kilbride 1990; Le Vine 1970). The women interviewed help undermine such rigid notions, demonstrating clear emotional
commitment to the women they marry. For example, one participant, Nduta, proclaims her feelings for her muka wakwa, or co-wife, Cirũ:

No one dare to disturb my co-wife in any way, and especially knowing what I would do to them. No one dares point a finger at her. I tell her to proudly proclaim her belongingness to me, and I to her. . . . What I hate most is when people come to gossip to me about my co-wife’s whereabouts or whom they have seen her with. I don’t care as long as she is here for me now and even after I am gone. . . . Regardless of what she does, she is here because of me. Then why should I tell her what to do and what not to do. She is a free woman. And that is what I want her to be. So, when they come here to gossip, I tell them to leave her alone. She is mine and she is here on my property, not yours. . . . She who sincerely loved me and I loved back, let her stay mine. It is she who shall enshrine and take over this household when my time comes. (in interview)

In addition to expressing love (wendo) for Cirũ, Nduta also alludes to the fact that Cirũ is not restricted from having sexual encounters with men outside the woman-woman marriage relationship. Such liaisons, however, in no way undermine Cirũ’s reciprocated love and appreciation for Nduta. In a separate interview, Cirũ, who has been married to Nduta for over 25 years, presents her deep feelings for her marriage partner:

I know that some people do talk negatively about our marriage. Although honestly I have never caught anybody personally. But I ask myself, “What is it that women who are married to men have that I don’t have? Is it land?” I have land. “Is it children?” I have children. I don’t have a man, but I have a woman who cares for me. I belong to her and she belongs to me. And I tell you, I don’t have to worry about a man telling me what to do. Here, I make all the decisions for myself. Nduta likes women who are able to stand on their own, like herself. I do what I want and the same goes for Nduta. Now I’m so used to being independent, and I like that a lot. I married Nduta because I knew we could live together well. She is a very wonderful woman with a kind heart. (in interview)

While functionalist interpretations perceive African family relationships in terms of the purposes they serve in the functioning of a society, our interviewees highlight the complex and intertwined aspects of relationships that one would expect to find in a discussion of any committed, caring marriage partnership, undermining prevailing notions of the non-emotional African “Other.”

One other point in the ideology of the nuclear family that remains strong, even among scholars, but is challenged by the woman-woman marriage data, is the alleged need for a father figure to maintain “functionality” (Cheal 1991). . . . The presence of a father is apparently not so important in many woman-woman marriages. During interviews, some women downplayed the importance of men in their households. Of the eight households in our study, six did not include permanent relationships with male partners. Among these six households, it seemed clear based on our interviews that male involvement with children, beyond procreation, was restricted, even identities of designated male genitors could not be revealed. Cirũ’s comments support the view that males are viewed principally as friends and/or sex partners with no claim on children or property. What does she desire from men? Not much, apparently, except perhaps sex, and she can get that when she wants on her own terms:

I have freedom to have sex with any man that I desire, for pleasure and for conceiving babies. And none of these men can ever settle here at our home or claim the children. They can’t. They are not supposed to, and they know that very well. They come and go. (in interview)

Nduta’s comments present the same lack of interest in having a man around as the ideal situation, expressing the independence provided by keeping men out of the household:

We have no interest with a man who wants to stay in our home. We only want the arume a mahutini [men met in “the bush,” a term for “male genitors”]—meaning those who are met only for temporary
needs. The meaning for this is for a woman to be independent enough so that she can make her own homestead shrine. Cirušées also that I myself do not keep a man here. What for? To make me miserable? If I kept a man here who will then start asking me for money to buy alcohol, where would I find such money? (in interview, emphasis added)

Another case that downplays the importance of a male presence is that of Mbura, who had been married to a man, though he had died over 40 years ago. She was more recently married to a woman, Nimù, who subsequently left after a couple of years. Mbura was later married to a woman named Kabura on the last day of this fieldwork. Mbura responds as well to the question of the place of men in the woman-woman marriage household, adding that, to her, men are not trustworthy, though she still appreciates their temporary presence:

Men, even the good friends, know that they are not welcome here. They are here just for a visit and to leave. Whatever they come here to do, they must leave. They cannot be trusted. That is not good. One is given respect and that’s all. (in interview)

Despite the fact that the other two households in the study did have men present as partners of one of the ahikania, or marriage initiators, the need for a “father figure,” an ideal of most heterosexual nuclear families is clearly not a universal reality for all family situations.

BEYOND COMMON EXPLANATIONS

An overview of the literature on woman-woman marriages in African societies might tempt a reader to make three intertwined cross-cultural generalizations. The first generalization regards access to children. Sudarkasa suggests that the basis for woman-woman marriage, as with African marriages generally, is the desire “to acquire rights over a woman’s childbearing capacity” ([1986] 1989, 155). That is, the woman who initiates a marriage seeks access to children that she herself does not have. Rights over childbearing capacity are often linked to a second general theme: that children are desired by such women as a means of transferring property through inheritance. . . . Connected to both general circumstances is the third common assertion that women’s “barrenness” is a fundamental factor prompting woman-woman marriages. In fact, one of the most widely held general assumptions, as Burton points out, is that woman-woman marriages must involve women who cannot themselves have children (1979). . . .

Gikũyũ women in our relatively small study sample, living within a very proscribed spatial setting, expressed multiple and heterogeneous reasons for marrying women. . . . The women initiating these marriages pursued various objectives: companionship to appease loneliness, to be remembered after death, to have children to increase the vibrancy of the household, to fulfill social obligations in accordance with indigenous spiritual beliefs, and not least to avoid direct domination by male partners in a strongly patriarchal society, including men’s control of both the women’s behavior and household finances.

Our study does not deny the inability to bear children, inheritance, or lineage as partial explanations for some, or even many, Gikũyũ woman-woman marriages. Expressed reasons for marrying women in our study did often include the desire for the muwikania to have a child to inherit property and/or to perpetuate her family lineage. However, such explanations are never offered as the exclusive reasons, nor are they offered by all women. Such women appear to have much greater latitude in choosing how and why they participate in woman-woman marriages. For example, situations that defy Leakey’s account include those in which women who are already married to men (who are still alive) and have their own children then initiate uhiki, or marriage, with a woman, as in the above described case of Kuli (married to Wamba).

Mbura’s explanation for kuhikia, or marrying a woman superficially resembles Leakey’s account, since she expresses a desire for children
that she herself cannot bear, as indicated in the following statement:

I married Nimũ because I could never have children myself. I did not even give birth to children who later died, nor did I experience any miscarriage. I remained the way I came out of my mother’s womb. And now I’m getting old and there is no way I can sit, think and decide to have a baby because my time is over, unless Ngai’s [God’s] miracle happens to me [she laughs]. I think a lot about how my husband left me and how I can’t have a baby. . . . I ask Ngai wenda ndiathima na mutumia ungi [God, please bless me with another woman]. . . . “Won’t you please send that woman here to my home.” Who knows, that woman might . . . give me a child. . . . Don’t you see when I die I will be satisfied that I have left somebody in that home, who shall continue and revive that home? (in interview)

Mbura continues, suggesting that companionship to appease loneliness is another strong motivation for marrying a woman:

Let me tell you, I’m not the only one or the first one to marry a woman. And certainly, there are many others out there like me. I’m all alone just like that. No husband, no child. Just poor me. No one is here to keep me company or even to ask me “Did you sleep well?,” except for occasional visits by some people like those you met here the other day. (in interview)

While Leakey’s explanation may partly account for Mbura’s case, Nduta’s case clearly has emerged under a set of circumstances not fully considered by Leakey. First of all, Nduta’s decision is the result of women’s collaboration, namely between Nduta and her mother-in-law. Nduta married a man named Ndingũ with whom she had three sons and a daughter. However, early in their marriage, her husband and their three sons were poisoned to death by some people in her husband’s clan who wanted their land. After their deaths, Nduta’s mother-in-law advised her to marry a woman as a way of protecting their family and land from male relatives who were trying to take her land, a sign of the tenuous hold that women have over land in Gĩkũyũ society (Mackenzie 1990). Rather than being victimized by men within their family, Nduta’s case shows how women collaborate to look out for one another to protect women’s interests:

When a woman is left alone, she should not be frightened, but must be brave. You must make yourself a queen, otherwise, be a coward and everything you stand for will be taken away from you by those who are hungry for what you have. . . . If you were a woman, and you had properties, you will be the first one to be stolen from by the men
who thought they were more important than women. So, she must act...I had a lot of properties and if it were not for karamu [the “pen”] that cheated me out of many of them, I would still have a lot. I lost many of them because I was a woman and I had no sons. So, my mother-in-law advised me to marry my own woman because all my people had been finished [i.e., killed] except for my daughter. And that is the piece of advice that I myself chose to follow. So I married her. When I married her [Cirü], she said “It is better to live with a woman. I’m tired of men.” I responded, “Is that so?! I love that.” We became good friends and partners and thereafter I gave ruracio to her family. (in interview) ...

Nduta’s case is similar to Mackenzie’s and Leakey’s images of woman-woman marriage presented by those authors in that she had been married to a man who died and she had no sons (they died as well). However, upon marrying a woman after her husband’s death, she asserts that she could have passed her land to her daughter, Ceke. Indeed, Ceke was given half of Nduta’s land. While Nduta explained that she could have left all of her land to Ceke, she decided against doing so because she did not want to constrain her daughter with the social expectations that “staying at home” entails:

...I didn’t want my daughter, Ceke, to stay here. I gave her freedom to fly and land wherever she wanted. That is the same freedom that brought me here. So why would I want to hold her here? Women like to go far. They don’t like to be held down at their birth home. (in interview)

While the issue of inheritance is important in Nduta’s case, related to her difficult struggle as a woman to maintain control over land resources, Nduta adds an important dimension drawn from Gĩkũyũ mythology. This reason becomes clear when we hear Nduta, who is about 90 years old, speak of her dead sons who, she says, visit her in her sleep to thank her for marrying a woman:

Roho wa anake akwa makwrire [the spirits of my dead sons] come to visit me to show appreciation for what I have done for them. One time they came and told me, “Thank you, mother for marrying Cirũ for us. We are very grateful for bringing us dead people back home again. We are grateful indeed. For that we will always be watching over you. Nothing will ever harm you. We will take care of you.” And then I would say, “If I didn’t marry Cirũ for them, who else would I have married her for?” Then the other day they came to tell me that I have got only five years to live; that I’m going to die soon [she laughs hard]. I said, “Is that so? Thanks a lot and may Ngai be praised!” That is fine for me. I need rest. (in interview)

Nduta’s sons died long ago, very young, and had not been able to accomplish much in their lives. Some Gĩkũyũ still believe that if someone dies suddenly, his or her life activities can be carried out as if they are still alive so that their opportunities would not be denied. Thus, when their mother married Cirũ, she married her in the same way her sons would have married had they lived. In this sense, even though these sons were already dead, they feel quite at home because of Cirũ’s presence.

While Nduta’s and Mbura’s cases push the limits of Leakey’s narrow inheritance-focused account of woman-woman marriage, the case of Nduta’s daughter, Ceke, falls largely outside the scope of his scenario. Ceke’s decision to marry a woman appears to be heavily influenced by the example set by her mother, who acted as a role model. However, unlike her mother she was at the same time still married and living with her husband, Ngigi, together with her daughter, Wahu, along with Wahu’s six children. Having grown attached to Wahu’s children, Ceke was insecure about whether Wahu would move away with them, leaving Ceke in a household without children. Ceke’s marriage to a woman (Ngware) was thus viewed as a way Ceke could have more children. Ceke’s intention was that her wife, Ngware, would have children with her husband, Ngigi. After having a child, however, Ngware left the household. Ceke and Wahu (her daughter) then reached an agreement that the children would be welcome to remain with Ceke even if Wahu decides to leave:
Although my daughter was living with me at the time, and had all these children that you see here, I did not know what to expect from her. I did not know whether one day I will wake up and find her gone with all her children that I personally have raised and who actually call me maitu [mother], or whether she had already made up her mind that she will never leave. I made that move of wanting to find out when my wife [Ngware] left us. After that, my husband and I made an agreement with Wuahu that she will live with us permanently and that if she will ever feel like leaving, her children that we have raised as our own will be welcome to remain with us where they are already guaranteed good care as well as land settlement when they grow up. In any case, this is her land too, you know. Since we have got no other children, everything we have belongs to her and her children and to my other son borne by my wife before she left. (in interview)

While this example supports the general claim that women marry women to acquire rights over childbearing capacity (Sudarkasa [1986] 1989), Ceke’s decision is not linked to property inheritance, “barrenness,” or widowhood: the three essential criteria for a Gĩkũyu woman-woman marriage, according to Leakey. Like Mbura, Ceke’s strong desire for children was an important factor in her decision. The option of woman-woman marriage as a means to fulfill this desire was immediately apparent, given the influence and example of her mother, Nduta.

Finally, we have already alluded to the more overtly political motivations for marrying women expressed by some of our interviewees. The relative freedom from male control, which appears to be built into Gĩkũyu woman-woman marriages, is expressed most forcefully by Cirũ and Nduta in previous quotations. Recall, for example, Nduta’s conversation with her then wife-to-be, Cirũ, who commented, “I’m tired of men,” to which Nduta responded, “I love that.” And Nduta’s comment about why she doesn’t live with a man, stating “What for? To make me miserable?” Recall also these women’s comments regarding the sexual freedom they find in these relationships. And finally, recall the opening quote in which Cirũ states that her woman-woman marriage allows her to avoid having “a man telling me what to do.”

These examples demonstrate that flexibility, heterogeneity, and ambiguity appear as guiding principles in explaining such marriages, rather than being governed by somewhat rigid social rules, as the literature so often implies. However, contributions to the woman-woman marriage literature have continually, since the early-twentieth century, presented these relationships in functionalist terms. Cheal suggests that functionalist explanations continue to be perceived as having a “subterranean” influence on the study of families, describing such relationships in terms of “the ways in which they meet society’s needs for the continuous replacement of its members” (1991, 4). Our alternative has been to present the institution of woman-woman marriage, at least in the Gĩkũyu context, as a flexible option available to women within which they may pursue any number of interests: political, social, economic, and personal.

**What’s in a Name? Rethinking the “Female Husband”**

Another area of concern for us in the literature is the unquestioned use of the term “female husband,” the general term used to describe women who initiate woman-woman marriages. . . . Not surprisingly, the major debate regarding the term “female husband” is over the male social traits often attributed to such women. Some have criticized the emphasis placed on gendered assumptions regarding sex-roles. For example, Krige suggests that one cannot assume that female husbands generally are taking on male roles (1974). Rather, one must carefully study sex-roles in particular societies. For the Lovedu, Krige points out that numerous roles involve both males and females. Oyewumi, writing about the Yoruba, argues that local terms for both “husband” and “wife” are not gender-specific since both males and females can be husbands or wives (1994). As a result, as Burton (1979, 69) contends, the assumption that “husband” and “male” are automatically
connected “confounds roles with people” since “husband” is a role that can be carried out by women as well as by men. Amadiume (1987), Burton (1979), Krige (1974), Oyewumi (1994), and Sudarkasa (1986) all suggest that in many societies, “masculinity” and “femininity” are not as clearly defined categories as they are in the West; presuming that “husband” automatically connotes “male” and that “wife” connotes “female” imposes western sex-role presumptions on other societies, ignoring local ambiguity regarding these roles (Sudarkasa [1986] 1989).

While our study supports views that women initiating marriages are not characterized as “male,” we question the continued use of the term “female husband” to describe such women. Burton (1979), Krige (1974), and Sudarkasa (1986), while criticizing those who confuse social roles with genders, implicitly suggest that the term “female husband” is adequate and that the only task is to transform its connotative meaning. We argue that the term “female husband” should be reconsidered on the grounds that the male connotation of “husband” cannot be so easily disposed of; just as the term “wife” conjures an association with “female,” so does “husband” with “male.” Especially in contexts where gender roles are ambiguous, this implicit association will easily mislead readers to impose western presumptions upon woman-woman marriages. Thus, in our view, efforts to theoretically disassociate gender from such role-centered terms—like “husband” and “wife” in this instance—imposed originally by western researchers in colonial contexts, will in a practical way continue to impose a male/female dichotomy. . . .

We acknowledge that there is nothing essential about the term “husband” that necessitates domination and control. But we also acknowledge, as does Oyewumi, that historically the term “husband” in most western contexts is normally associated with the role of “breadwinner,” “decision-maker,” and “head of household” (1994). We feel that the use of the term “female husband” serves to mask the relatively egalitarian woman-woman marriage relationships we encountered. . . .

The relative absence of domination, for example, is evident in the terms the women used to describe one another. The women interviewed never used the Gĩkũyũ term for “husband” (muthuri) to describe their partners. Instead, they consistently referred to each other using the terms mutumia wakwa and muka wakwa, which when used by these women translates as “co-wife,” or muiru wakwa, which translates as “partner in marriage,” indicating the mutual respect and relative equality between them. While most women in our study who initiate the marriages tended to be women with social influence and/or relatively greater material wealth, within the marriages both women interpreted their relationship as semiotically and materially equal.

Furthermore, women in our study rejected any male-association with their position of initiator of the marriage. None of the women interviewed indicated that they aspired to be like “males.” As a tentative alternative to “female husband” we have been using the phrase “marriage initiator” to describe women in that position. However, we acknowledge that such description can be problematic, especially if it is used to focus more attention on the “initiator” at the expense of the agency of the one “initiated” into the marriage. We also acknowledge that descriptions of such concepts will differ from one culture to another.

NOTES

1. Other terms include “woman-marriage” and “woman-to-woman marriage.”

2. The names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.

3. Note that multiple Gĩkũyũ terms seem to describe the same concept. Choice of term depends upon the context in which the concept is employed. For example, while “marriage initiator” in one context is expressed as muhikania, the plural form of the concept is ahikania.

4. It is important to acknowledge that in most cases, polygamous marriages among the Gĩkũyũ
come as a result of negotiation between the first wives and husbands.

5. While the sexuality of the women involved in woman-woman marriages is clearly one of the most interesting unresolved issues on the topic, the Human Subjects Review Board reviewing the research proposal decided that the topic was too sensitive, and therefore declared such questions off limits.

6. Interviews were conducted in the Gikũyũ language and were translated by the primary author.

7. Miario miuru, or “negative talk,” that is mentioned by Cirũ in this quotation points to fundamental changes that have occurred in Gikũyũ society over the course of the twentieth century with colonialist religious and educational training. These changes are reflected in complex local attitudes toward indigenous practices and are discussed briefly in the last section of this paper.

8. Ngai commonly translates as “God,” although the Gikũyũ term carries no gendered connotation.

9. Karamu, or “the pen,” refers to the use of title deeds (by those who could read and write—mainly men) that conferred private ownership of property since the 1960s. This private ownership was started under colonial rule and undermined (though it did not eliminate completely) more customary land tenure rules (Mackenzie 1990).

REFERENCES


Introduction to Reading 13

This article offers a wonderful analysis of the relational nature of masculinities and femininities in the context of the changing lives of working-class married people in a suburban community in Mumbai, India. Sociologist Annie George discusses the ways in which women’s “discourses” on men’s actions provoke men to assume a new honorable masculinity that is softer and more accepting of women’s autonomy.

1. Describe the research approach employed by Annie George for this study.

2. Discuss the role of sexual self-control in the idea of honorable masculinity.

3. How did women’s “discourses” contribute to the reshaping of definitions of (honorable) masculinity?

Reinventing Honorable Masculinity

Discourses from a Working-Class Indian Community

Annie George

Maintenance of personal and family honor and avoidance of shame are central concerns of Indian communities. Honor in Indian contexts is typically viewed as engendered and embodied. Yet notions of honor and gendered identities—masculinities and femininities—have ambiguous and contradictory meanings that shift in relation to contexts and histories over time. In this article, I provide an interpretive account of honor and masculinities that operates among a group of working-class men and women of Mumbai, India, through analyses of two related discourses: men’s accounts of sexual self-control and women’s accounts of “understanding” men.

For a section of working-class men of Mumbai, sexual self-control forms a central constituent of a gendered, embodied notion of honorable masculinity. For working-class women, however, economic provisioning and absence of physical and sexual violence are critical markers of honorable masculinity. The linkage of these conditions is surprising because Indian discourses on honor hold that women’s bodies and actions, and not those of men, are the primary markers of personal and family honor (Dube 1986; Gold 1994; Jefferey, Jeffrey, and Lyon 1989; Kumar 1994; Ram 1991; Sharma and Vanjare 1993).

Men’s claims about sexual control within marriage—when a popular interpretation of marriage is men’s social license to have relatively unregulated sexual access, the so-called male right in marriage—destabilize received ideas of both honor and masculinities in Indian literature and are my starting point to explore emerging forms of honorable masculinities in particular Indian communities. I make two related arguments about emerging masculinities and honor. First, men’s actions and women’s discourses on men’s actions critically shape men’s honor. Second, the masculinities men seek must be considered contemporaneously with the femininities that are emerging around them. Traditional avenues for men to gain honor were that of providing adequately for their families and exercising control over their wives and children. Men controlled their wives’ sexuality, movements outside the house, and access to and control over productive resources. However, consequent to social and economic changes in their everyday lives and increased participation of women in economic activities outside the house, men and women are redefining hegemonic ideas about gendered identities and creating new, even contradictory, discourses on gendered honorability.

**Study Locale and Methods**

This study was conducted for a period of twelve months from November 1995 in Kaamgar Nagar (a pseudonym), a community of approximately three hundred thousand people in suburban Mumbai. Kaamgar Nagar comprised a government-recognized shantytown surrounded by people living “illegally” on land that was not designated for slum settlements. Some residents were born in Kaamgar Nagar; others migrated to the city from all over India. We gained access to potential participants through nongovernment organizations that worked in Kaamgar Nagar introducing us to the people of the area. We contacted thirty-seven currently married men, of whom twenty-three agreed to participate in the study. All men had middle school education, were married more than five years, and had at least one live child.

Although all men participants were employed, they had a hard time supporting their families, which typically had three adults and three children. Ten men were self-employed in skilled and unskilled trades as plumber, electrician, flower seller, newspaper vendor, and so on. Seven had permanent jobs in the private and public sector. Of the remaining, three were contract labor, and the others were daily wage earners. The range of monthly income in this group varied from one thousand to five thousand rupees. Only one man owned the 10 × 12 feet tenement that was their home.

We also conducted repeated in-depth interviews with sixty-five married women residents of Kaamgar Nagar, similar in social class to the men participants. We gathered information from separate focus-group discussions with married men and women and observations and interviews with other residents and regulars of the study site. But data were primarily obtained through repeated in-depth interviews because this method has been used successfully to elicit sensitive information (Balmer et al. 1995; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Heltzer-Allen, Makhamberta, and Wangel 1994). Each participant was interviewed two to three times, and interviews lasted between half an hour and two hours. They were interviewed at their homes; in local teashops; their work sites, if self-employed and eventually, because of the lack of privacy and frequent interruptions, in a local school classroom after school hours. Areas of discussion
included sexual experiences, negotiation and decision making within marriage, sexual experiences outside marriage, perceptions of sexual risk, and the use of risk-reduction practices. Discussions, conducted in Hindi and Marathi, were audiotaped, transcribed, translated into English, sorted, and coded by categories that were generated through the data themselves. An in-depth content analysis was then conducted on the data in relation to the category of sexual control to provide insights into men’s and women’s ideas of marital sex and ideal gendered masculinity.

SEXUAL CONTROL IN MARRIAGE

Men used the English word control to refer to three distinct sets of activities: periodic sexual abstinence with one’s wife, avoidance of sexual relations outside marriage, and the practice of withdrawal as a form of contraception. In this article, I focus on the first two uses of this concept. Men’s narratives indicated that they sought to observe normative expectations for sex within marriage. These rules of action related to frequency of sex at various stages in life, times and places for sex, and permissible sex acts and partners. During the early years of marriage, couples were expected to have frequent sex for physical pleasure and procreation. After fathering a number of children, however, men were expected to focus attentions as well on their families and the world around and gradually to decrease their interest in sex. Men considered their sexuality to be unruly by nature and in need of control. They believed that, in contrast to women’s sexual interests and needs, which declined sharply after having several children, men’s sexual urges did not decrease even after many years of marriage and being sexually active. Thus, most men said they were unable to practice the expectation of decreasing sexual activity even when they had achieved their desired family size. They desired sex more often than their wives did, leading them to conclude that their desire was “in excess.” Men reported practicing sexual control by not having jyada (excessive) relations with their wives. Sambhaji, thirty-three-years-old and married thirteen years, discussed this dynamic of sexual control as follows:

After two children usually a woman’s urge decreases whereas in the case of a man it remains the same even till fifty years of age. Even if I try to have sexual intercourse with my wife she does not get involved in it. I want it every day whereas she does not. At this age what is the use of a strong sex urge? We have three children. In young age we were too enthusiastic about sex, we enjoyed as much as we could. Now we have to “control.”

Here, Sambhaji’s notions about appropriate activities for a man of his age and marital status guided his practice of sexual self-control. Men who reported being in a position similar to Sambhaji’s made similar remarks about having to struggle with their sexuality. These views suggest that men considered honor to be embodied through self-control. Married men had social permission to have sexual access to their wives; yet some married men reportedly chose self-control.

Women’s narratives corroborated these views, and most women appreciated monogamous, understanding men who moderated their demands for marital sex. Gauri, married twelve years, described her husband as follows:

He is understanding (samajdhar). He does not want [sex] everyday, just once in fifteen days, once in a month. . . . If I tell my husband that today I don’t have the mood he says, “That’s okay, let’s forget it.” People in our family and even other people say your husband is very understanding.

Here, the woman, her family, and people in her daily life evaluate as honorable her husband’s refusal to engage in coercive marital sex. In contrast, dishonorable husbands were reported to coerce wives to have sexual relations. Many women we interviewed reported regular experience of coercive sex, and some mentioned that their husbands also engaged in sex outside marriage. One such woman was Zeenat, who, when seeking treatment from a local doctor for symptoms...
of a sexually transmitted infection she contracted from her husband, noted that the doctor evaluated her husband negatively. When the doctor learned that Zeenat’s husband was a taxi driver she said, “[Sexually transmitted infections] are a specialty among wives of drivers. Drivers are greedy for sex. One woman is just not enough for them. They go to outside women and come to their wives for sex without a care that this [sexual ill health] happens.”

Through her narrative Zeenat sought to convey that it was not only she but also others such as medical doctors who perceived her husband as dishonorable because of his actions: first of having sex outside marriage, and then of coercing his wife to have sexual relations and face the consequences of his lack of sexual control.

**Honor at Home, Dishonor Outside**

Sex outside marriage was the foil against which married men spoke of marital sex, sexual self-control, and, by extension, honorable masculinity. Since marriage is the only culturally sanctioned means by which a person could have sexual relations, men talked about their wives as being “women of the house” and “proper women.” In contrast, they described sex outside marriage as “wrong, bad work” (*galat kaam*) that men did with “wrong, bad women” (*galat aurat*). These cultural rules on marital sexuality contextualize Khalil’s answer to a question about whether he ever had a sexual relationship outside marriage. He said, “When we have everything in the house, why should we walk on the wrong path?” This quotation, which is typical of other men’s views, foregrounds the notion that sex outside marriage with an “outside woman” outside the house was a loss of sexual control. Men knew that sexual illnesses could be prevented through monogamy, and sexual control was a means of preventing sexual illness—the bodily marker of dishonor and the absence of self-control.

A study (Verma, Rangaiyan, and Narkhede n.d.) conducted in Kaamgar Nagar of practitioners providing treatment for male sexual problems supports this interpretation. Verma et al. found that medical practitioners causally linked sexual illness to absence of sexual control. The practitioners attributed perceived causes of various male sexual problems like boils and sores in the genital area, white discharge, thinning of semen, wet dreams and lack of erection to an excess of unsatisfied sexual desire, masturbation, and sexual intercourse. Oral and anal sex and sex with “cheap” women are also considered important reasons for *garmi*, a serious illness. Participants in our study shared these beliefs. Thus, Vinayak’s answer that his “nature was clean” in response to a question on whether he thought he was susceptible to a sexually transmitted disease shows the connections he made between sexual control and its trade-offs, such as the avoidance of stigmatizing illness and the consolidation of personal honor.

Our discussions with men did not specifically include the type of sexual act they practiced with their wives. We learned about cultural expectations of permissible sex acts when men talked about its transgression. Many men described their current married sex life as “boring.” Only Bhimrao said that he had extramarital sex because he was “fed up of doing the same thing again and again” with his wife. He went to sex workers after marriage because they did things that “one could not do with the wife.” From local constructions of honorable masculinity, this man was doubly out of control in this instance: he had sex outside marriage, and engaged in sexual acts that were outside the realm of marital sex.

Vasant, who had watched pornographic films after marriage, spoke elliptically about sexual acts permitted in marriage. He opined that any man would feel like doing some of the things he saw being done in these films, but a man “will not do such a thing with his own wife, maybe with an outside woman.” Because he considered his desire as reasonable, he claimed that control was even harder. Few Indian studies on sexual behavior list the type of sex acts performed by sex workers. One study of Calcutta sex workers (Jana and Chakroborty 1994) reported that while the “usual mode” of sexual intercourse was vaginal,
the majority of sex workers also practiced oral sex, and one-quarter practiced group sex. Sex outside marriage could provide men with alternative sexual practices, which they considered more interesting than marital sex. Yet this analysis of men’s narratives suggests that men sought honor through claims of resisting nonnormative sex.

**SEX OUTSIDE MARRIAGE: LOSS OF CONTROL AND HONOR**

Male respondents frequently mentioned controlling one’s desire to have sex with a woman other than one’s wife as a form of sexual control. I did not get the impression that all male respondents, if given social sanction, would have sex outside marriage. Rather, men spoke of the nonavailability of extramarital sex as a kind of loss. Societal double standards ensured that men who had extramarital sexual relations were censured less than their female partners were; yet the existence of censures helped men maintain control. Several men spoke of wanting to avoid the dishonor of having wives and kin discover their extramarital relationships. Gopal said that men would not admit having sexual relations outside marriage because of “shame.”

Articulating a widespread local belief that regular provisioning was a fundamental mark of a responsible man, Ramesh said he did not want to “lower his head with the shame of being known as one who did not provide for his family.” Some men juxtaposed sex outside marriage and economic provisioning. Men reportedly avoided sex outside marriage, even when sex at home was boring, because they were uneasy paying for transient pleasures with scarce money that could be spent on the family. Even a one-time extramarital episode was expensive, and men weighed the benefit against other ways the family could use the money.

... (M)en viewed the desire for sex outside marriage as their unreasonable craving for sexual pleasure which, putatively, was already available to them through marriage. Also related was the notion of the issues to which responsible men should give primacy, namely, family provision and stability and sexual control.

**COMPETING MASCULINITIES, COMPETING CLAIMS**

Control was seen as a necessary practice to further a family’s social advancement. Men who practiced sexual control made statements similar to the following, which was Bashir’s rationale for sexual control:

One does feel sexual desire, but we have to keep control over ourselves because we want to move ahead in life. So, even if we have the desire in the mind, the body should avoid it.

Honorable men were those who, from the perspective of their families, neighbors, and communities, had moved ahead in their lives. In the congested living environment of slum characterized by one-room houses with porous walls, the boundaries between private and public life were slippery. Family life spilled onto the streets; neighbors saw, heard, and talked about the goings-on in each other’s houses. A man’s wife and the community around empathized with men who tried to advance in life through the performance of honorable masculinity and were critical of men who did not. Men who did not adhere to local notions of honorable masculinity, particularly economic provisioning, were labeled “weak” or a “mouth to feed.” Mahmood expressed this belief as follows: “My wife doesn’t work. When I am working, where is the need for her to work?” In reality, women in Kaamgar Nagar worked to support their families and reportedly persuaded husbands to put aside concerns about male honor in favor of economic stability through women’s wage work. Lakshmi’s narrative elaborates this point.

The children are growing up and expenses are increasing. I wanted to work, but he would say,
“No, don’t work. The woman of the house should not go out.” Now that I am on this job, he feels ashamed. He says that in our family, no woman before me went out to earn money. People talk. They say, “Is this man so weak that he is sending his wife to work?” That’s why he told me that if I am going to work, it is on my own responsibility. Nobody should accuse him that he sent his wife to work, that he is weak. There should be no talk like this.

Men’s concerns about personal honor constrained customary ideas about gendered divisions of labor and marital power relations. Like Lakshmi, two of every three women we interviewed worked to complement the man’s earnings, and one in three women was the main wage earner of the family. In contrast, all the men we interviewed claimed to be regular providers with stay-at-home wives, have no addictions, and control their wives without excessive use of force. Ten male respondents went further and claimed to practice sexual control. In sharp contrast to men’s claims—and some women’s claims for their men—we learned of dishonorable masculinities from female respondents. In such narratives, men were portrayed as being unreliable or nonproviders who were addicted to gambling or alcohol, having extramarital sexual relations, and being “excessively” physically violent toward the wife and children.

I present segments of three women’s narratives, each of which highlights women’s perspectives on (dis)honor and masculinity.

Farida highlighted the reversal of traditional gendered division of labor when she described her husband as follows: “Today he is not feeding me. I am feeding him.” Farida’s husband worked irregularly, although he was a skilled mechanic who, she claimed, could find work easily. She worked as a construction laborer to make ends meet. As their financial situation deteriorated, Farida removed her two older children from school and put them to work with her. Additionally, she herself started working night shifts at an export factory.

However, after some time, he stopped working and at the time we interviewed her, Farida was working her day job and night shifts at the export factory, and she reported that she and her husband were . . . objects of neighborhood talk. This vignette reveals the engendered nature of honorability where the man’s “dishonorable” actions were as severely censured by his neighbors as the necessary wage-earning, yet allegedly honor-damaging, actions of his wife.

Girija recounted the story of her neighbors’ reactions to her husband’s extramarital activities.

My husband was going behind one woman in our area. That woman’s brother saw him with me. He asked, “Who is she, what is she to you?” My husband said, “My wife.” Then that woman’s brother said, “Despite having a wife, why are you behind my sister?” He slapped my husband a few times. Now [that man] meets me in the bazaar sometimes and asks me whether my husband behaves properly.

This vignette indicates that neighbors differentiated among actions of the individuals in a marital dyad and awarded respect accordingly. It also indicates that cultural expectations and public surveillance constrain men to control their actions. Similar to the case of Farida above and that of Sheila to follow, Girija’s narrative shows the workings of public evaluation of individual actions of men and women to accord personal and family honor.

Sheila noted that word had spread in their community that her husband’s family was “not good.” She observed,

Marriages do not take place in their family. They are unreliable providers, alcoholics, wife beaters. Only [her husband] is married. His older brother is single. The one older than him, he married a woman but would not work and feed the family. She left him and married somebody else. And there is yet another one older than him. He tricked a girl to marry him saying that things are good at our place. But when the girl came here and saw the situation, she left within three months. When he went to bring her back, her parents beat him and sent him away. Now, marriages do not take place in their family.
This narrative shows that, contrary to received ideas about women’s actions shaping family honor, it was the cumulative effect of actions of individual men of a family and public talk about these actions that damaged their personal and family honor.

Women’s narratives, like the ones just presented, indicate that individual (in)actions were consequential for personal and family honor and that men lost honor through public knowledge of and women’s discourses on men’s actions. Instead of being tied to women’s actions alone, personal and family honor in this framework are also defined by men’s actions. Women’s discourses suggest that urban residents differentiate between family and individual honor and the personal honor of individuals in marital dyads. This explains why women can claim personal honor while being married to men who dishonor families through their actions.

**EMERGING HONORABLE MASCULINITIES**

The question still remains, however, what do men gain through claims to practice sexual control, a private action, when they can gain honor through public actions such as providing for their families and being moderate in other activities? This analysis of honorable and dishonorable masculinities in a working-class community of Mumbai suggests that masculinities and men’s personal honor are co-constituted through men’s own actions, private and public, sexual and otherwise, and women’s discourses about men’s actions. Contemporaneously, emerging masculinities are shaped by, and in turn shape, emerging femininities.

Mature, responsible men in the *grihastha*—householder—stage were expected to maintain a balance among public actions of pursuing economic advancement and social and religious commitments and private actions of pursuing sexual pleasure. Working-class men of Mumbai found it hard to provide regularly and/or adequately for their families; often, they resorted to borrowing large sums of money to meet family needs. When men did not make regular economic provisions for the family, their wives had to seek wage work. Women became de facto heads of families and acted in ways that could be perceived by their husbands and communities as being out of the bounds of male control, although women and families also acknowledged the circumstances and the necessity of women taking on these responsibilities. Women worked outside the house for wages and made independent decisions relating to family concerns, children, and expenditure of money; some assertive women resisted coercive marital sex. Thus, autonomous wives challenged men’s efforts to forge traditional, honorable masculinities.

In situations of fluid gender roles and authority, men sought honor to command influence and renegotiate power relations between themselves and their wives. . . . Working-class men in contemporary Mumbai sought to reestablish a dominant position in their families through the accrual of personal honor, at least in the sexual arena, which then would legitimate their claim to power and position as head of family. Alter’s (1994, 55) point. . . . that men in positions of power, when confronted by what they perceive to be an almost apocalyptic transformation of society, are forced to see the extreme contingency and the fictional basis of their gendered position. As a result, they critically deconstruct elements of that ideology in search of a more primary, natural truth about themselves and claim to practice celibacy to embody their gender. By locating a “truth” of their gendered identities in sexual self-control, some contemporary working-class Mumbai men translate an ideology of domination into an insidious form of biological determinism and as a means to claim moral piety and personal honor.

Women and men worked to create positive evaluations for their responses to changing social realities such as autonomous wives and men who “allowed” the existence of such wives. Discursively, men constructed themselves as honorable by presenting themselves as moderate and in control. The concepts of *moderation* and *excess* show the linkages between sexual control
and honor. The shared belief of the local people was that men who practiced moderation in observable activities such as earning money, consuming alcohol, and controlling their wives were also assumed to be moderate in their private actions. Men’s primary gain through sexual control is the honor of being perceived by their wives, families, and neighbors as honorable men. Some men reportedly sought honor through the practice of moderation in their sexual and familial lives, while others indulged in excesses and continued to be unreliable providers. Therefore, men who claimed to practice sexual control, despite their difficult economic situation, increasingly autonomous wives, and social sanction to enjoy conjugal rights, could claim personal honor. This is a source of their view of themselves as honorable, in sharp contrast to men in similar circumstances who lost control of themselves and resorted to “unmanly” behavior.

Women, in contrast to men, used the concept of understanding husbands to seek positive valuation and honor for an emerging form of masculinity that allowed women to work for wages, assume greater responsibility and decision-making power in the home, and assume greater control of marital sexual experiences and that did not readily resort to violence to exert authority over women. Normalizing this new masculinity serves to normalize a newly emerging autonomous femininity. Formerly, gendered identities and honor were based on men’s ideas of women’s actions, thereby allowing men to define idealized gendered identities and relations of domination and resistance between men and women. By reversing this pattern and constructing honor also through women’s ideas of men’s actions, urban working-class women are recasting and stretching the contours of honorable masculinities and femininities and gender relations. When women discursively construct male honor as related to men’s actions in the area of provisioning, (absence of) violence against women, and sexual control, they provoke men to assume responsibility for their personal and family honor. . . . Women’s discourses on men’s actions also facilitate the emergence and acceptability of a “softer” masculinity in contrast to other masculinities that are characterized by consumption (Anandhi, Jeyaranjan, and Krishnan 2002; Osella and Osella 2000), violence (Butalia 2000; Menon and Bhasin 1998) or sexual dominance of women (George 1998; Khan et al. 1996). Through discourse, women seek to normalize an assertive, autonomous femininity that exists alongside this emerging masculinity.

NOTES

1. Formerly known as Bombay, Mumbai lies on India’s west coast and is India’s commercial capital.

2. And other emerging social realities. For an account of emerging Dalit (formerly untouchable) masculinity in the context of changing caste relations in a rural Indian context, see Anandhi, Jeyaranjan, and Krishnan (2002).

3. The author conceptualized the study of which these data form one part. She interviewed female respondents and participated in focus-group discussions and observations. A male researcher assistant, under the supervision of the author, conducted interviews with male respondents.

4. The men who refused to participate probably differed from those who did; they were, however, demographically similar to the participants. The participants came from Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist communities, mainly from Maharashtra State (of which Mumbai is the capital), with a few from other Indian states. However, there were no major differences along community lines with respect to data described in this article.

5. In 1995, the exchange rate for the U.S. dollar was approximately thirty-eight rupees for one dollar.

6. It is interesting to note that none of the men mentioned masturbation in their discussion of sexual control. However, for a discussion of masturbation as a sexual illness that resulted from “excess” and, hence, implicitly, from lack of self-control, see Verma, Rangaiyan, and Narkhede (n.d.). I thank Adele Clarke for bringing this point to my attention.

7. All names used are pseudonyms.

8. For a discussion of urban middle-class Indian women’s constructions of “understanding” husbands, see Puri (1999, 141–43).
9. Thirty-one of sixty-five female respondents reported the experience of sexual coercion by husbands, and fifteen reported that husbands had extramarital relationships.

10. Condom use was rare among this group of men. Less than 1 percent of them reported regular use of condoms.

11. The deep sense of shame involved when a man contracts a sexually transmitted infection has been reported by HIV-positive men; see Bharat (1997).

12. Recent unpublished studies of male sexual activities from various rural and urban locations in India indicate that men who practice extramarital sex reported a variety of sexual acts: vaginal, oral, and anal sex practiced individually with a woman partner and also in groups of men with one or more women (Bert Pelto, pers. comm., March 9, 2004).

13. This is no doubt an artifact of self-selection, as we only formally interviewed those men and women who volunteered to do so.

14. Of the sixty-five we interviewed formally, thirty-four claimed they could not rely on their husbands for regular economic support, thirty-two reported experiences of physical violence from the husband, thirty-five reported that husbands had extramarital relations and/or “second wives,” and thirty-one reported to experience of sexual coercion by the husband. These statistics also are an artifact of self-selection. It appears that the majority of men and women who participated considered themselves to embody local ideas of honorable gender identity.

15. Indeed, characterization of actions as private or public are erroneous, as such distinctions blur in real-life situations.

REFERENCES


Introduction to Reading 14

Maria Lepowsky is an anthropologist who lived among the Melanesian people of Vanatinai, a small, remote island near New Guinea, from 1977 to 1979, for two months in 1981, and again for three months in 1987. She chose Vanatinai, which literally means “motherland,” because she wanted to do research in a place where “the status of women” is high. The egalitarianism of the Vanatinai challenges the Western belief in the universality of male dominance and female subordination.

1. What is the foundation of women’s high status and gender equality among the people of Vanatinai?

2. What does gender equality mean on Vanatinai? Does it mean that women and men split everything fifty-fifty? Are men and women interchangeable?

3. What are the similarities and differences between the egalitarianism of the Gerai people (depicted in Helliwell’s article in this chapter) and that of the people of Vanatinai?

Gender and Power

Maria Alexandra Lepowsky

Vanatinai customs are generally egalitarian in both philosophy and practice. Women and men have equivalent rights to and control of the means of production, the products of their own labor, and the products of others. Both sexes have access to the symbolic capital of prestige, most visibly through participation in ceremonial exchange and mortuary ritual. Ideologies of male superiority or right of authority over women are notably absent, and ideologies of gender equivalence are clearly articulated. Multiple levels of gender ideologies are largely, but not entirely, congruent. Ideologies in turn are largely congruent with practice and individual actions in expressing gender equivalence, complementarity, and overlap.
There are nevertheless significant differences in social influence and prestige among persons. These are mutable, and they fluctuate over the lifetime of the individual. But Vanatinai social relations are egalitarian overall, and sexually egalitarian in particular, in that at each stage in the life cycle all persons, female and male, have equivalent autonomy and control over their own actions, opportunity to achieve both publicly and privately acknowledged influence and power over the actions of others, and access to valued goods, wealth, and prestige. The quality of generosity, highly valued in both sexes, is explicitly modeled after parental nurture. Women are not viewed as polluting or dangerous to themselves or others in their persons, bodily fluids, or sexuality.

Vanatinai sociality is organized around the principle of personal autonomy. There are no chiefs, and nobody has the right to tell another adult what to do. This philosophy also results in some extremely permissive childrearing and a strong degree of tolerance for the idiosyncrasies of other people’s behavior. While working together, sharing, and generosity are admirable, they are strictly voluntary. The selfish and anti-social person might be ostracized, and others will not give to him or her. If kinfolk, in-laws, or neighbors disagree, even with a powerful and influential big man or big woman, they have the option, frequently taken, of moving to another hamlet where they have ties and can expect access to land for gardening and foraging. Land is communally held by matrilineages, but each person has multiple rights to request and be given space to make a garden on land held by others, such as the mother’s father’s matrilineage. Respect and tolerance for the will and idiosyncrasies of individuals is reinforced by fear of their potential knowledge of witchcraft or sorcery.

Anthropological discussions of women, men, and society over the last one hundred years have been framed largely in terms of “the status of women,” presumably unvarying and shared by all women in all social situations. Male dominance and female subordination have thus until recently been perceived as easily identified and often as human universals. If women are indeed universally subordinate, this implies a universal primary cause: hence the search for a single underlying reason for male dominance and female subordination, either material or ideological.

More recent writings in feminist anthropology have stressed multiple and contested gender statuses and ideologies and the impacts of historical forces, variable and changing social contexts, and conflicting gender ideologies. Ambiguity and contradiction, both within and between levels of ideology and social practice, give both women and men room to assert their value and exercise power. Unlike in many cultures where men stress women’s innate inferiority, gender relations on Vanatinai are not contested, or antagonistic: there are no male versus female ideologies which vary markedly or directly contradict each other. Vanatinai mythological motifs, beliefs about supernatural power, cultural ideals of the sexual division of labor and of the qualities inherent to men and women, and the customary freedoms and restrictions upon each sex at different points in the life course all provide ideological underpinnings of sexual equality.

Since the 1970s writings on the anthropology of women, in evaluating degrees of female power and influence, have frequently focused on the disparity between the “ideal” sex role pattern of a culture, often based on an ideology of male dominance, publicly proclaimed or enacted by men, and often by women as well, and the “real” one, manifested by the actual behavior of individuals. This approach seeks to uncover female social participation, overt or covert, official or unofficial, in key events and decisions and to learn how women negotiate their social positions. The focus on social and individual “action” or “practice” is prominent more generally in cultural anthropological theory of recent years. Feminist analyses of contradictions between gender ideologies of female inferiority and the realities of women’s and men’s daily lives—the actual balance of power in household and community—have helped to make this focus on the actual behavior of individuals a wider theoretical concern.¹
In the Vanatinai case gender ideologies in their multiple levels and contexts emphasize the value of women and provide a mythological charter for the degree of personal autonomy and freedom of choice manifested in real women’s lives. Gender ideologies are remarkably similar (though not completely, as I discuss below) as they are manifested situationally, in philosophical statements by women and men, in the ideal pattern of the sexual division of labor, in taboos and proscriptions, myth, cosmology, magic, ritual, the supernatural balance of power, and in the codifications of custom. Women are not characterized as weak or inferior. Women and men are valorized for the same qualities of strength, wisdom, and generosity. If possessed of these qualities an individual woman or man will act in ways which bring prestige not only to the actor but to the kin and residence groups to which she or he belongs.

Nevertheless, there is no single relationship between the sexes on Vanatinai. Power relations and relative influence vary with the individuals, sets of roles, situations, and historical moments involved. Gender ideologies embodied in myths, beliefs, prescriptions for role-appropriate behavior, and personal statements sometimes contradict each other or are contradicted by the behavior of individuals.

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Material and Ideological Bases of Equality

Does equality or inequality, including between men and women, result from material or ideological causes? We cannot say whether an idea preceded or followed specific economic and social circumstances. Does the idea give rise to the act, or does the act generate an ideology that justifies it or mystifies it?

If they are congruent ideology and practice reinforce one another. And if multiple levels of ideology are in accord social forms are more likely to remain unchallenged and fundamentally unchanged. Where levels of ideology, or ideology and practice, are at odds, the circumstances of social life are more likely to be challenged by those who seek a reordering of social privileges justified according to an alternative interpretation of ideology. When social life embodies these kinds of contradictions, the categories of people in power—aristocrats, the rich, men—spend a great deal of energy maintaining their power. They protect their material resources, subdue the disenfranchised with public or private violence, coercion, and repression, and try to control public and private expressions of ideologies of political and religious power.

On Vanatinai, where there is no ideology of male dominance, the material conditions for gender equality are present. Women—and their brothers—control the means of production. Women own land, and they inherit land, pigs, and valuables from their mothers, their mothers’ brothers, and sometimes from their fathers equally with men. They have the ultimate decision-making power over the distribution of staple foods that belong jointly to their kinsmen and that their kinsmen or husbands have helped labor to grow. They are integrated into the prestige economy, the ritualized exchanges of ceremonial valuables. Ideological expressions, such as the common saying that the woman is the owner of the garden, or the well-known myth of the first exchange between two female beings, validate material conditions.

I do not believe it would be possible to have a gender egalitarian society, where prevailing expressions of gender ideology were egalitarian or valorized both sexes to the same degree, without material control by women of land, means of subsistence, or wealth equivalent to that of men. This control would encompass anything from foraging rights, skills, tools, and practical and sacred knowledge to access to high-paying, prestigious jobs and the knowledge and connections it takes to get them. Equal control of the means of production, then, is one necessary precondition of gender equality. Vanatinai women’s major disadvantage is their lack of access to a key tool instrumental in gaining power and prestige, the spear. Control of the means of production is potentially greater in a matrilineal society.

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GENDER IDEOLOGIES AND PRACTICE IN DAILY LIFE

In Melanesian societies, the power of knowing is privately owned and transmitted, often through ties of kinship, to heirs or younger supporters. It comes not simply from acquiring skills or the experience and the wisdom of mature years but is fundamentally a spiritual power that derives from ancestors and other spirit forces.

In gender-segregated societies, such as those that characterize most of Melanesia, this spiritual knowledge power is segregated as well into a male domain through male initiations or the institutions of men’s houses or male religious cults. Most esoteric knowledge—and the power over others that derives from it—is available to Vanatinai women if they can find a kinsperson or someone else willing to teach it to them. There are neither exclusively male nor female collectivities on Vanatinai nor characteristically male versus female domains or patterns of sociality (cf. Strathern 1987:76).

Decisions taken collectively by Vanatinai women and men within one household, hamlet, or lineage are political ones that reverberate well beyond the local group, sometimes literally hundreds of miles beyond. A hundred years ago they included decisions of war and peace. Today they include the ritualized work of kinship, more particularly of the matrilineage, in mortuary ritual. Mortuary feasts, and the interisland and inter-hamlet exchanges of ceremonial valuables that support them, memorialize the marriages that tied three matrilineages together, that of the deceased, the deceased’s father, and the widowed spouse. Honoring these ties of alliance, contracted by individuals but supported by their kin, and threatened by the dissolution of death, is the major work of island politics. . . .

The small scale, fluidity (cf. Collier and Rosaldo 1981), and mobility of social life on Vanatinai, especially in combination with matriliney, are conducive of egalitarian social relations between men and women and old and young. They promote an ethic of respect for the individual, which must be integrated with the ethic of cooperation essential for survival in a subsistence economy. People must work out conflict through face to face negotiation, or existing social ties will be broken by migration, divorce, or death through sorcery or witchcraft.

Women on Vanatinai are physically mobile, traveling with their families to live with their own kin and then the kin of their spouse, making journeys in quest of valuables, and attending mortuary feasts. They are said to have traveled for these reasons even in precolonial times when the threat of attack was a constant danger. The generally greater physical mobility of men in human societies is a significant factor in sexual asymmetries of power, as it is men who generally negotiate and regulate relationships with outside groups (cf. Ardener 1975:6).

Vanatinai women’s mobility is not restricted by ideology or by taboo, and women build their own far-ranging personal networks of social relationships. Links in these networks may be activated as needed by the woman to the benefit of her kin or hamlet group. Women are confined little by taboos or community pressures. They travel, choose their own marriage partners or lovers, divorce at will, or develop reputations as wealthy and generous individuals active in exchange.

BIG MEN, BIG WOMEN, AND CHIEFS

Vanatinai giagia, male and female, match Sahlins’s (1989) classic description of the Melanesian big man, except that the role of gia is gender-blind. There has been renewed interest among anthropologists in recent years in the big man form of political authority. The Vanatinai case of the female and male giagia offers an intriguing perspective. . . .

Any individual on Vanatinai, male or female, may try to become known as a gia by choosing to exert the extra effort to go beyond the minimum contributions to the mortuary feasts expected of every adult. He or she accumulates ceremonial valuables and other goods both in order to give them away in acts of public generosity and to honor obligations to exchange partners from the
local area as well as distant islands. There may be more than one gia in a particular hamlet, or even household, or there may be none. A woman may have considerably more prestige and influence than her husband because of her reputation for acquiring and redistributing valuables. While there are more men than women who are extremely active in exchange, there are some women who are far more active than the majority of men.

Giagia of either sex are only leaders in temporary circumstances and if others wish to follow, as when they host a feast, lead an exchange expedition, or organize the planting of a communal yam garden. Decisions are made by consensus, and the giagia of both sexes influence others through their powers of persuasion, their reputations for ability, and their knowledge, both of beneficial magic and ritual and of sorcery or witchcraft. . . .

On Vanatinai power and influence over the actions of others are gained by achievement and demonstrated superior knowledge and skill, whether in the realm of gardening, exchange, healing, or sorcery. Those who accumulate a surplus of resources are expected to be generous and share with their neighbors or face the threat of the sorcery or witchcraft of the envious. Both women and men are free to build their careers through exchange. On the other hand both women and men are free not to strive toward renown as giagia but to work for their own families or simply to mind their own business. They can also achieve the respect of their peers, if they seek it at all, as loving parents, responsible and hard-working lineage mates and affines, good gardeners, hunters, or fishers, or skilled healers, carvers, or weavers.

Mead (1935) observes that societies vary in the degree to which “temperament types” or “approved social personalities” considered suitable for each sex or a particular age category differ from each other. On Vanatinai there is wide variation in temperament and behavior among islanders of the same sex and age. The large amount of overlap between the roles of men and women on Vanatinai leads to a great deal of role flexibility, allowing both individual men and women the freedom to specialize in the activities they personally enjoy, value, are good at performing, or feel like doing at a particular time. There is considerable freedom of choice in shaping individual lifestyles.

An ethic of personal autonomy, one not restricted to the powerful, is a key precondition of social equality. Every individual on Vanatinai from the smallest child to an aged man or woman possesses a large degree of autonomy. Idiosyncrasies of personality and character are generally tolerated and respected. When you ask why someone does or does not do something, your friends will say, emphatically and expressively, “We [inclusive we: you and I both] don’t know,” “It is something of theirs” [their way], or, “She doesn’t want to.”

Islanders say that it is not possible to know why a person behaves a certain way or what thoughts generate an action. Persisting in a demand to “know” publicly the thoughts of others is dangerous, threatening, and invasive. Vanatinai people share, in part, the perspectives identified with postmodern discussions of the limits of ethnographic representation: it is impossible to know another person’s thoughts or feelings. If you try they are likely to deceive you to protect their own privacy or their own interests. Your knowing is unique to you. It is your private property that you transmit only at your own volition, as when you teach magical spells to a daughter or sister’s son.

The prevailing social sanction is also individualistic: the threat of somebody else’s sorcery or witchcraft if you do not do what they want or if you arouse envy or jealousy. But Vanatinai cultural ideologies stress the strength of individual will in the face of the coercive pressures of custom, threat of sorcery, and demands to share. This leads to a Melanesian paradox: the ethic of personal autonomy is in direct conflict to the ethic of giving and sharing so highly valued on Vanatinai, as in most Melanesian cultures. Nobody can make you share, short of stealing from you or killing you if you refuse them. You have to want to give: your nurture, your labor, your valuables, and your person. This is where
persuasion comes in. It comes from the pressure of other people, the force of shame, and magical seduction made potent by supernatural agency. Vanatinai custom supplies a final, persuasive argument to resolve this paradox: by giving, you not only strengthen your lineage and build its good name, you make yourself richer and more powerful by placing others in your debt.

What can people in other parts of the world learn from the principles of sexual equality in Vanatinai custom and philosophy? Small scale facilitates Vanatinai people’s emphasis on face-to-face negotiations of interpersonal conflicts without the delegation of political authority to a small group of middle-aged male elites. It also leaves room for an ethic of respect for the will of the individual regardless of age or sex. A culture that is egalitarian and nonhierarchical overall is more likely to have egalitarian relations between men and women.

Males and females on Vanatinai have equivalent autonomy at each life cycle stage. As adults they have similar opportunities to influence the actions of others. There is a large amount of overlap between the roles and activities of women and men, with women occupying public, prestige-generating roles. Women share control of the production and the distribution of valued goods, and they inherit property. Women as well as men participate in the exchange of valuables, they organize feasts, they officiate at important rituals such as those for yam planting or healing, they counsel their kinfolk, they speak out and are listened to in public meetings, they possess valuable magical knowledge, and they work side by side in most subsistence activities. Women’s role as nurturing parent is highly valued and is the dominant metaphor for the generous men and women who gain renown and influence over others by accumulating and then giving away valuable goods.

But these same characteristics of respect for individual autonomy, role overlap, and public participation of women in key subsistence and prestige domains of social life are also possible in large-scale industrial and agricultural societies. The Vanatinai example suggests that sexual equality is facilitated by an overall ethic of respect for and equal treatment of all categories of individuals, the decentralization of political power, and inclusion of all categories of persons (for example, women and ethnic minorities) in public positions of authority and influence. It requires greater role overlap through increased integration of the workforce, increased control by women and minorities of valued goods—property, income, and educational credentials—and increased recognition of the social value of parental care. The example of Vanatinai shows that the subjugation of women by men is not a human universal, and it is not inevitable. Sex role patterns and gender ideologies are closely related to overall social systems of power and prestige. Where these systems stress personal autonomy and egalitarian social relations among all adults, minimizing the formal authority of one person over another, gender equality is possible.

NOTES


2. The appropriateness of using the big man institution to define Melanesia versus a Polynesia characterized by chiefdoms, the relationship of big men to social equality, rank, and stratification, and the interactions of this form of leadership with colonialism and modernization are central issues in recent anthropological writings on big men (e.g., Brown 1987, Godelier 1986, Sahlins 1989, Strathern 1987, Thomas 1989, Lederman 1991). I discuss the implications of the Vanatinai case of the giagia at greater length in Lepowsky (1990).

3. See, for example, Clifford (1983), Clifford and Marcus (1986), and Marcus and Fischer (1986) on representations. In this book I have followed my own cultural premises and not those of Vanatinai by publicly attributing thoughts, motives, and feelings to others and by trying to find the shapes in a mass of chaotic and sometimes contradictory statements and actions. But my Vanatinai friends say, characteristically, that my writing is “something of mine”—my business.
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REFERENCES


Topics for Further Examination

- Locate and read scholarly research on the Hijras of India, the Faafafines of Samoa, and the Kathoey of Thailand.
- Find research articles and Web sites on female and male circumcision and its meanings and consequences in different societies today.
- Look up scholarly studies that discuss the egalitarian gender system of the Iroquois Confederacy.
PART II

PATTERNS