

Explain how sex and gender beliefs shape social life

Within different communities, societies and cultures etc, people have beliefs which shape the way they behave, how they treat their fellow citizens and their attitude towards the broader spectrum of the earth. This essay is going to look at how such beliefs of sex and gender form the behaviour of the Sambia of Papua New Guinea and the Kogi of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. The information for this will be coming from Gilbert Herdt (2003), Alan Ereira (1992), Elizabeth Dodd (1997) and Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff (1982).

The Sambia

The Sambia are a mountain dwelling tribe located in Papua New Guinea. Within their way of life, beliefs on sex and gender are very influential on day to day living. Men and women have very different roles. An important part of the male life as part of the Sambia is the initiation of boy to man. According to Herdt, secrecy is highly regarded. The events that take place in a ritual are only to be known by Men who have partaken in it. Women are strictly not allowed to know "on pain of death" (2003: 71). To avoid women knowing what is happening, from the age of eight boys live exclusively in the men's houses, away from women for twenty or so years. Within these houses, the initiation involves homoerotic acts being performed between the initiates and the bachelors (Herdt, 2003: 71). It is also explained that as the initiation progresses, males are allowed to learn more and more myths and secrets of the tribe as their "manly right" which grants them prestige within the group (Herdt, 2003: 72).

Males are very dominant within the Sambia. Most public affair is controlled by men and they are rarely challenged by women who have little, if any, influence. This was especially significant in matters of war. (Herdt, 2003: 75). There are some places such as daily cooking and early child care where women have total control and men hardly challenge. This is the only place women have any real control. According to Herdt, men maintain such control as this because they fear that women will forcibly take control (2003: 75).

The Kogi

The Kogi are a community found on the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta Mountain in Colombia. Their social life is very much based on gender as their cosmological beliefs are. The Kogi believe that the earth is the ninth daughter of the Great Mother and that people were made to take care of her. They say the Mother is the mind behind nature and that she gives resources and takes care of living things (Ereira, 1992). Because of these beliefs, gendered roles are assigned within the society.

It is the male's role overall to take care of the women as they do the mother earth. Ereira's documentary recalls an eighteen-year-old man being told by an elder during a rite of passage "when you are married, and you have a woman, you have to look after her, you have to work for her, you mustn't ever hit her or mistreat her" (1992). In this sense, within the Kogi, men are very respectful of women. There is a tradition within the Kogi for which the previous quote is in context to. When a male reaches the age of eighteen, he must start to use a *porporo* which is a symbol of manhood. A *porporo* is shaped like a womb. It contains lime powder which is believed to civilise men. A lime covered stick is put in the mouth where the powder is combined with the saliva. The mixture is rubbed on the surface to create a shell. This practice represents "both sexes working together". It also maintains the man's connection to the Great Mother (Ereira, 1992).

Women take on the role of farming, especially picking plants as this will keep a good relationship between themselves and the Great Mother. As Ereira recalls, only mothers can plant beans as this creates a good

connection between the mother of a family and the Mother earth (1992). However, different cultures have different perspectives and from a feminist view point, such as Elizabeth Dodd in her book *the Mamas and the Papas: Goddess Worship, the Kogi Indians and Ecofeminism*, the social life of the Kogi could be seen as patriarchal. Within Kogi society, only men are allowed inside the “world house” called the *nuhue*. All weaving is done inside the *nuhue* by the men, excluding women who are not permitted to do this as it is not accustomed (Dodd, 1997).

In conclusion, beliefs on sex and gender have a significant influence on social life. They shape the roles and attitudes of men and women within different cultures depending on the beliefs of that community. These different beliefs can therefore create a wide range of perceptions on one’s own gender and others. In the Kogi, men have the role of protecting women and the men of the Sambia dominate women and keep secrets from them.