

## How do sex and gender beliefs shape social life?

‘The New Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language’ defines sex as ‘1. Either of two divisions, male and female, by which organisms are distinguished with reference to the reproductive functions. 2. Males or females collectively. 3. The character of being male or female’ (1999: 1152). In biological terms sex can be described as defined by body shape and the obvious differences in reproductive organs. Gender takes an individual’s sex and forms a person’s own perception of what it means to be identified as male or female. Along with an individual’s gender identity there are also social expectations associated with body shape and sex, social responsibilities and standing within a community and the tasks expected from males and females being shaped by different understandings of gender. The characteristics of female and male are not only biological but are further assumed to have perceived qualities. Females feminine characteristics may be defined pretty, soft, long haired, emotional. In contrast male perceived qualities may be defined as muscular, strong, aggressive, handsome, without emotions. Cultures from around the world have differing views and their beliefs and conceptions of sex and gender shape their societies in contrasting ways. It is not always comfortable to observe a culture’s perception of sex and gender, there is diversity, although the human species is similar, being human can be very different. The cosmology of a cultural group has great bearing on how male and female roles are created and lived. Two societies that offer very different gender roles shaped by their cosmological beginnings are the Kogi of Colombia and the Sambia of Papua New Guinea.

To understand the Kogi it is beneficial to understand their belief of how they came to be.

The Kogi explained to Ereira, a film maker invited by them to take a message out to the world of the younger brother from the older brother, that ‘*Aluna* was and is the mother’ (1990, p116). ‘In the beginning there was only *aluna*, the amniotic sea, the cosmic principle: the Mother’ (Ereira, 1990, p116). The Kogi explain that it was here that the Mother ‘conceived the idea of the world. It began with a womb, a world house, which was a *comos*. This was the great egg of the universe’ (Ereira, 1990, p116). From this womb the Mother, ‘conceived nine levels, nine worlds.....her daughters.....She also conceived of sons, among them Serankua’ (Ereira, 1990,p116). It was Serankua who ‘fertilised the world’ (Ereira, 1990,p117). The Mother conceived her ideas and all that is now in this world from *Aluna*. The Mother spent time and contemplated deeply on how this world was going to be. The Mother had thought of everything. Kogi believe it is their place and duty to look after this world and to maintain its balance. They are the Elder brother tasked with the guardianship of the world, living in the ‘*The Heart of the World*’ and their understanding of sex, male and female and the roles of gender are seen in their daily lives. The Kogi are a sedentary people and they do have levels of authority, this authority is to keep balance and harmony, with all nature requiring respect and thought. It is the Mammas that keep balance and order, they are the wise and ‘enlightened ones’ (Ereira, 1990, p77).

The Mammams are male (there are females too) and are the ones that ensure law and order, they were chosen by divination and their upbringing complex. They are aware of the need to respect women, their understanding of their beginnings was conceived from the Mother, female. The coming of age for a young boy is a very important step, the need to control of manliness is very important to the Kogi. The Mamma gives a gourd called a Poporo to a young man as an aid to concentration and meditation. The poporo is a symbol of the womb, chewing coca leaves and taking lime from a hole in the poporo with a stick and eating, followed by working the stick around the edge of the gourd, the male is encouraged to think of the woman, to respect the woman and be kindly to her. Coca leaves are taken from a plant that has been cultivated by the females, it is the female that pick the leaves. Reichel-Dolmatoff writes that 'The Kogi society is sexually very repressed; sex is sinful and women are said to constitute a dangerous element in society, bent upon disturbing its precarious balance' (1982, p293). There are many acceptable and unacceptable issues within the Kogi society in respect to female and male roles, but the emphasis of balance is what underpins everything. The balance in the Kogi society appears male dominant but in a balanced and considered way. An example of balance is the woman spinning cotton and the men weaving the cloth.

The Sambia in contrast to the Kogi believe that they are descendants of one man. This man was Numboolyo, he was believed to have fathered many, been strong, founded the social rules of how males and females should behave, 'hacked forests down', their brave ancestor, a male role model. Males must be masculine, strong, they must marry, polygyny is accepted and expected, being betrothed to infants or trading of women from different groups is common place. The sexual practices of men and their initiation into manhood are difficult to comprehend, the secrecy and the fears that surround their view of masculinity and how it is achieved and how easily it can be lost is at odds with how other cultures and societies see sex and gender. Creed wrote of the Sambia, 'we might say that femaleness is an ascribed characteristic while male is an achieved one. The essence and focus of this maleness invariably is semen (1984. P112).

These brief explanations of two cultures are sketchy in detail but show that female and male both sex and gender shape societies in ways that are not always easy to understand. There is no one way to say how a society is or should be shaped. There are ways of being that feel uncomfortable and difficult but to understand the beginnings is a start to be able to explain how sex and gender shape social life.

## References

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