

Groups: Sexual Antagonism

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THE GENDER OF THE GIFT

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THE PROBLEM OF GENDER IDENTITY

Individual sexual identity is a cultural issue in Western society. Preoccupation with sexual performance, heterosexual or homosexual, turns erotic behavior into a significant source of self-definition. Yet the notion, for instance, that homosexual behavior might involve an exclusive orientation to one's own sex would seem to be comparatively recent in Western Europe.¹⁶ It is a point Herdt stresses in postulating that Sambia homosexual behavior does not produce 'homosexuals', that is, a "single identity type" (1984a:x). His argument is that outward sexual behavior is not necessarily formative of internal identity—"feelings, ideas, goals, and sense of self."¹⁷ And it is this internal identity that is the subject of his delineation of masculinity, namely men's sense of their own gender—"the developing boy's sense of himself and his maleness" (1981: 14). It would be unfair to make too much of a term that he situates within psychological discourse; but Herdt's specialized use of 'gender identity' confines gender within the psychodynamics of individualized personal experience, even if it includes experience of the world and of others and is regarded as developing in response to specific cultural demands.

Melanesians make considerable imagistic use of gender. But we cannot assume that individual identity is at the heart of what is going on. Concern with identity as an attribute of the individual person is a Western phenomenon—it is we who, as Wallman (1978) said, make sex into a role. The sex-role model derives, in turn, from certain cultural assumptions about the nature of 'society'. To assimilate Melanesians' understanding of initiation and puberty rituals to sex-role socialization supposes the actors hold a similar model of sociality. This may cloud appreciation of Melanesians' own preoccupation with these issues. For it is important to be clear about the extent to which we do or do not wish to make their preoccupation ours. Even if we de-intellectualize them as 'experience', I am not convinced that we have understood everything about their gender concepts in understanding people's orientations towards being men or being women.

The sex-role model does not, of course, assume that identities are only their own point of reference. A relational view is built into it. Masculinity may be described as a psychosocial dialectic (Herdt 1982a:74). In addition, the solidarity of the male community exists at the expense of females (Herdt 1982a:48), and the initiation system is fraught with internal contradiction in the relations it supposes with women (Keesing

1982:36).¹⁸ Langness explicitly argues that it is in the face of cross-sex ties that men construct their exclusiveness: "Boys are naturally attracted to their mothers and must be removed from them by the community of males" (Langness 1977:18). Herdt bases his analyses of Sambia men's beliefs and rites on the transsexual fantasy that men began as a composite of maleness and femaleness. "It is my hypothesis," he says, "apropos the most secret of myths, that it 'helps convert a man's nagging fears that he has feminine attributes into a positive conviction that he is masculine'" (1981:263). There is no doubt, then, that these analyses incorporate a relational view, so that the construction of solidarity along sexual lines is regarded as inhering in power relations between men and women as well as in the stereotyping of their differences. But at the same time the sex-role model assumes that the focus of ritual concern is the individual who is in some sense the responsive self.

There are a number of interesting affinities here to feminist discussions. However, internal feminist debate also leads to radically divergent views about gender identity. For some, what has to be explained is 'gender identity' in Herdt's sense, the sexed self. But this position, in turn, is split between those who regard the sexing as a prior state, and those who locate it in discourse.¹⁹ A further constellation of views dwells on the ideological origin of the categories through which the sexed self is thought, and thus their relation to cultural and social formation. This view, which may be claimed for and by Marxist/Socialist feminists, has come under attack for its presumption of the arbitrary nature of gender ideology and for the supposition that the primal state of being is genderless, gender being acquired through socialization.

Garens made one such attack. She argues that the body is always imagined and thus is always "the site of the historical and cultural specificity of masculinity and femininity" (1983:152); the situated body has to be the subject of analysis, and it is a historic fact if it is situated in a society divided and organized in terms of sex. But such specificity is not to be regarded as after the event: there was never "a neutral, passive entity, a blank state, on which is inscribed various social 'lessons'" (1983:144).²⁰ Her view is not a biological essentialism, she makes clear, but an account of the (conscious) subject as a sexed subject. Such a view attacks the alleged neutrality of both body and consciousness found in some socialization theory and in the suppositions of some Socialist feminists that a de-gendering of society is possible. The neutralization of difference would entail normalization, part of a rationalist program, she

objects, which itself invests heavily in the idea that gender is ideology and ideology is malleable.

This particular account focuses on sexual difference as an organizing device in the construction of subjectivity. It entails a view of the person as an individual 'subject', as opposed to those concerned with an ideological view of 'society' and of the self as an ensemble of social relations.²¹ Either may claim to account for the other's position. The debate teaches us that we require a theory of unitary identity before we construct a theory of unitary gender identity. From there one might ask which societies do indeed foster a concept of a genderless, neuter person upon which gender difference becomes inscribed, and which societies throw up the idea of there being no persons as subjects who are not sexed subjects. Given that both positions are claimed simultaneously in the context of Western feminist debate is a fascinating 'feminist' contribution. Neither can be taken for granted. Consequently, the conflation of gender and identity, the notion that gender difference is first and foremost a matter of the integration of the person as self (against an other), must be examined as a specific historic form.

It is clear that a sex-role model of socialization cannot be taken in an unexamined way as the base line for exploring gender difference. For all their emphasis on real experience as opposed to symbolic analysis, in seeing gender as a matter of identity, as experienced masculinity or femininity, it is those anthropologists concerned to record how individual persons feel who also, in fact, give indigenous symbolism an autonomy in their analyses. This could be put in ideologist terms. Ideology acquires autonomy in *their accounts* in so far as they argue that the cause of the symbols (of masculinity) lies in the parameters of these symbols themselves (making men into men). For in appealing to how men and women think and feel, they allocate the whole woman or the whole man to a gendered status. What women and men do can be understood as exemplars of what 'women' and 'men' do²² and thus as the subject matter of the difference between maleness and femaleness. Lost in all this is Mead's (1935:301) original caution that there may be societies in which it is not possible to "feel like a man" or "feel like a woman." It remains a matter of ethnographic verification whether or not 'being a man' or 'being a woman' occupies an organizing—representational, systematizing—place in the classification of behavior. Lost in all this too is a grasp of what the differentiation—the oppositions and exclusions—may be about.

In failing to see potential grounds here for relating such issues to feminist discussions of gender, either on points of agreement or disagreement, those concerned with identity confine themselves in the end to a limited view of what is being constructed in these relations. Indeed, one encounters a muted antagonism to feminist-derived interests. Read finds it necessary to make a valedictory disclaimer:

I find no reason to revise anything I said about the character of male-female relationships among the Gahuku-Gama in 1950: the economic, social, political and ritual subordination of women and the presence of 'tension', anxiety, ambivalence, opposition and conflict in inter-sex interests, attitudes and behaviour. I do not think this paints a one-sided picture influenced by any bias I may be assumed to have had as a male. (1982:67)

He goes on to say that men cannot know or experience fully what it is to be a woman and that Gahuku women never told him "how it felt." He describes interaction between the sexes but makes no reference to feminist issues except in the context of women's expression of identity. His envoi states,

I have no quarrel with those *women* anthropologists who suggest that their male colleagues have tended to be neglectful if not cavalier in their scholarly treatment of *women* [my emphasis].

But he chides them for overenthusiasm in their "worthy aim of trying to demonstrate that women are persons in their own right" (1982:76-77).

A feminist view is recognized but is de-intellectualized. It is not held to impinge on the analysis of the interaction between the sexes but simply comprises an essentialist equation between 'women' as subjects of study and 'women anthropologists'. Moreover, the essentialism is compounded by his insisting that what one needs to counterbalance an analysis of how Gahuku men feel is how Gahuku women feel!

The point is underlined heavily by Langness in the essay which follows:

I cannot imagine trying to answer . . . fundamental questions of sex and gender relations without further information about what individual actors *feel* and *think* about what is going on [original emphasis]. (1982:79)²²

In other words, feminist scholarship is caught by its practice of bringing into prominence women as a social category. Interest in women's point of view is the field within which intellectual feminist debate develops, yet the scholarship is bypassed in such cursory treatment. Feminist

thought is assimilated only to its own political position. The search for identity that Read so easily assumes underlies the intention of 'women anthropologists' is, in fact, a matter for internal debate. Taking it for granted leads to a curious analytical lacuna in these accounts of initiation ritual and cults.

In spite of the relational frame suggested by antagonism and its synonyms, analysis boils down to the conflict between the values of manhood or masculinity and the values of womanhood or femininity. Thus, differentiation from women is seen to serve the purpose of making men into men. Across Melanesia, it is argued, there is a broad spectrum of 'man-making' rites, connected by the ideology "that men are a cultural artifact and women (in a far more fundamental sense) are simply what they were born to be" (Read 1984:221). Men's image of themselves is insecure, so that questions of identity appear pressing. Such arguments equate gender as a role with sexual identity: the problem presented by the opposite sex is what your own sex is, viz., male dominance is about preserving maleness in encounters with females. Again, Langness had made an important break with these arguments. While he agrees that male ritual makes warriors, he questions whether "it is designed to make them men in the sense of somehow solidifying or transforming their gender identity" (1982:80). Yet his own emphasis on the primacy of experience supports the assumption that representations of male-female relations concern only relations between men and women.

The lacuna lies in the failure to ask what the nature of the relations is. If the relation between men and women is conceived in a contrast, then what is the point of contrast? What form of power is framed by the exclusions and oppositions?

Analyses concerned with gender as identity—with how women and men experience being women and men—take the relationship between the sexes as axiomatic; it is the site at which masculinity and femininity fight it out. This is indeed 'antagonism', where the tenor of the relationship is seen as arising from the need of each sex to carve out an antithetical definition; in particular, men carve out their masculinity from the 'natural' identity of women, subjugating women and natural process itself to their control. Keesing writes,

Once we anthropologists take seriously the challenge of fitting partial explanations together, further connections come into view. Thus the male political solidarity stressed in sociological theories is fully congruent with a neo-Marxist emphasis on male appropriation of women's labour and control

over their reproductive powers. . . . [He goes on:] the sexual symbolism of phallic power and pseudoprocreation. . . . becomes compelling in a society where men are created, not natural, and where they must control women, whose essential nature is dark and dangerous and beyond male regulation. (1982:33)

If women's threat to men emerges as a problem that Papua New Guinea men conceptualize, then we are dealing with statements about relations. It is the business of 'we anthropologists' at least to ask what kinds of statements they are. Should we be satisfied with a self-reproductive frame—with a view of dominant males producing males needing to be dominant?

Many feminist scholars would concur in the project of elucidating categories principally by reference to the perpetuation of the categories themselves. They would find nothing exceptional, for instance, in the observation Bowden makes of Sepik gender symbolism in art, that if one is dealing with artifacts as the creations of men, then one's study must be complemented by women's views and values. Yet there is a flaw in this dualistic approach. In seeing men's creations as likely to represent a "man's view of the world," the analyst assumes that what men ponder upon is themselves, so that the artifacts that visually express "ideals relating to masculinity" represent an idealized expression "of what it is to be a man" (as distinct from a woman) in this or that society (Bowden 1984:447–448). The flaw lies in not making explicit the underlying theory of representation, here a naive correspondence between the sexed individual and the autonomy of 'male' and 'female' viewpoints.

Since there are clear parallels between (for instance) Bowden's argument and certain feminist positions, these latter could be dismissed as redundant. Indeed, the internal conflict between feminist positions could be thought to negate all of them. However, my intention in recalling feminist debate was to point precisely to the internal diversity of stances. Constructed in relation to one another, these positions cannot be apprehended axiomatically. Far too axiomatically, I believe, has the sex-role model held sway in anthropological analyses of Highlands initiation and male-female antagonism. Individuals are regarded as recruited into their sex rather as clan groups recruit their members, and the boundary problems of group identity and the boundary problems of individual (masculine) identity become merged together. Among the drawbacks of such an approach is the further assumption that identity consists in the possession of qualifying attributes, in whether an indi-

vidual 'has' the characteristics that make him unambiguously masculine. It is important to contextualize these assumptions by juxtaposing different ones.

From within feminist debate, one might turn to other positions, such as those that regard images of the sexes as referring neither to autonomous, bounded entities distinct from one another nor to the relation between them (Shapiro 1979, 1983). Idealized masculinity is not necessarily just about men; it is not necessarily just about relations between the sexes either.

One could consider, for instance, Barrett's critical treatment of representations. She examines the position that ideology does not reflect 'reality', a criticism of other feminists that could also be applied to those Melanesians who take gender constructs as reducible to the affairs of men and women. She quotes Adams (1979):

as long as feminist theories of ideology work with a theory of representation within which representation is always a representation of reality . . . the analysis of sexual difference cannot be advanced. . . . [W]hat has to be grasped is, precisely, the *production* [original emphasis] of differences through systems of representation; the work of representation produces differences that cannot be known in advance. (1980:86, 87)

At the same time, Barrett insists that representation is not free floating; it is contextualized ("Linked to historically constituted real relations"). Yet the constituting nature of symbolic strategies needs no introduction in anthropology, nor does a theory of their necessary contextualization. It is all the more surprising that anthropological accounts of gender symbolism remain so narrowly focused on men and women themselves.

And it is tantalizing, then, that in his own reflection on earlier analyses of the Bena Bena version of the *nama* cult, Langness should carefully observe that none of the rites seemed (as he put it) primarily phallic or primarily uterine. "There are, to be sure, both phallic and uterine symbols in relative abundance; but these are inextricably mixed together" (1977:114). About the same time, Dundes (1976:232) provocatively raised the old question about whether male initiation ritual feminizes or masculinizes the participants. His answer, that it may do both, invites further questions about how, in that case, difference is established between the two processes. And however much the differences affect the way in which women and men 'think' and 'feel', that experience cannot in itself provide the grounds for the process of differentiation as such.

