

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### THE POLITICS OF SELFHOOD AND GENDER IN NEW GUINEA

JAMES F. WEINER

GILLIAN GILLISON, *Between Culture and Fantasy: A New Guinea Highlands Mythology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993. xxiv, 392 pp., Bibliography, Illustrations. £17.95.

RAYMOND C. KELLY, *Constructing Inequality: The Fabrication of a Hierarchy of Virtue among the Etoro*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1993. vii, 604 pp., Bibliography, Index, Figures, Tables, Photographs. \$69.50/\$24.95.

IN their introduction to a Special Issue of the journal *Social Analysis*, devoted to 'Sexual Antagonism, Gender, and Social Change in Papua New Guinea', Gilbert H. Herdt and Fitz John P. Poole (1982: 4) wrote that throughout the history of anthropology in New Guinea 'the idea of "sexual antagonism"...has remained largely a vessel of unexamined assumptions that has often obscured as much as it has revealed'. Moreover, they continued, 'logical distinctions among such notions as "segregation", "separation", "contrast", "opposition"..."envy"...and "hierarchy" (e.g. domination-subordination) are rarely drawn or, where drawn, are not systematically analyzed' (ibid.). One could not disagree with this assessment, and in fact it is still germane to raise it after more than a decade of continuing research in Melanesia. But although we can conclude that this was an important first step, other steps remain to be taken in order for New Guinea ethnography to continue to exert its transformative effect on anthropological theorizing about gender and sociality. For we now have to add the very notions of 'sexuality', 'male', 'female', 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' to Herdt and Poole's list. In other

words, it is of limited utility to question the validity of sexual antagonism only to retain an essentialist and Western view of what constitutes the male and female sexes and acts of sexuality.

If the two books under review here accomplish anything—and they both accomplish much—it is just this critique of essentialist notions of sexual identity and sexual relationship in Papua New Guinea. For each author challenges us to isolate exclusively male or female identities, attributes, acts or capabilities, or their specifically sexual or erotic nature. Of the Gimi of the Eastern Highlands described by Gillison and the Etoro of the South Highlands portrayed by Kelly, we can say two things. First, sexual identities, like all social identities, are relationally constituted; that is, the difference between male and female in New Guinea is, as Gregory Bateson (1958) first observed, largely a product of the elicitory strategies of social interaction. And second, because the perception of these differences thus emerges within a social value space, it is contiguous with other reference points within that space. Thus, what we identify as sexual attributes and capacities are subsumed within more encompassing cosmological processes that include growth, consumption and life energy. The differential vectors, directions and polarities of such processes are given moral as well as cosmological assessment, and it is upon these differential assessments that we attach the labels that signal sexual identity and contrast.

In fact, Kelly wants to argue that gender is a non-subject for the Etoro, since he locates the difference between male and female within a broader system of social inequality. His book is an effort to provide, first, a comprehensive analysis of the sources of social inequality in the Etoro sociocultural system, and secondly, a critical evaluation of the most prominent works on social inequality in recent times (specifically, the theory of Collier and Rosaldo (1981) concerning inequality in simple societies). Kelly begins by defining social inequality as ‘social differentiation accompanied by differential moral evaluation’ (p. 4). For the Etoro, this differential moral evaluation is made by assessing the contribution people make to the perpetuation of life, chiefly through the transmission, accumulation or appropriation of semen, which is the ‘animating principle of an individual’s spiritual constitution’ (p. 13). Men, who are of course the source of semen, promote life by acts that lead to the transmission of semen to others: either by inseminating their wives and subsequently ‘feeding’ the foetus *in utero*, or by stimulating the growth and physical maturity of boys by inseminating them orally. Semen contributes to the strength of a person’s *hame*, which ‘embodies the animating principle and vital energy of human existence’ (p. 147–8). Senior men who have spent a lifetime engaged in donating semen to others thus occupy the highest position in the hierarchy of virtue. At the other end of the scale are witches, who suffer from a ‘mutation of the soul (*tohorora*)’ (p. 143), which predisposes them to consume the life force of others for their own selfish aggrandizement.

Each Etoro person is thought to possess a spirit double (*ausulubo*) that ‘replicates the possessor’s physical body in form but lacks corporeal substance’ (p. 146). A witch harms his/her victim by attacking the *ausulubo* and consuming the spirit organs that are the doubles of the physical organs. A woman exerts a

weakening effect on a man because the latter expends semen in the act of sexual intercourse. As long as this depletion of semen serves to ensure conception and the subsequent *in utero* nourishment of the foetus, it is morally valued, though still a sacrifice on the part of men. A woman who, on the other hand, entices her husband into intercourse to no reproductive purpose is acting in a morally negative manner, and is like a witch; she is abetting the expenditure of life force to no purpose other than her self-gratification.

For the Etoro, the contrast is not strictly speaking between hetero- and homosexual acts of intercourse, but between those acts that allow the proper flow of life substance and those that do not. The insemination of an older man by a younger man is by the same token repugnant to the Etoro because it releases a flow of life in a direction opposite to that which is conventional and morally approved. Furthermore, Kelly establishes that unlike many other New Guinea peoples, including the Kamula who are culturally and geographically very close, Etoro men and women are not seen to possess distinct and complementary productive capacities. Indeed, an Etoro husband and wife share virtually all productive tasks in their subsistence regimen (though if men's and women's procreative contributions to reproduction are not set apart from their 'economic' capacities, then there is a complementarity of male and female attributes among the Etoro that has focal social implications). Etoro women are not disadvantaged with respect to men in the distribution of food or wealth; in fact, quite the opposite.

In sum, Kelly says that the relation between male and female cannot be defined except as it takes its place within a more global system of prestige and stigma that includes, among other things, witchcraft capacity, spirit mediumship, men of status, and differentiation in life-cycle position. *The Construction of Inequality* expands upon the analysis Kelly first made in his important article 'Witchcraft and Sexual Relations' (1976), but goes significantly beyond that in its situating of this nexus within a wider system of status hierarchy.

For the Gimi, the issue of sexual difference revolves around the sacred flute (the focus of the male cult) and its ownership, that is, who originally possessed it, who stole it, and to whom it must be returned. Gimi men and women tell their own myths, each of which gives a different account of original possession and original loss, and of the consequences of that loss for sexual dimorphism.

In the many descriptions of the cult from the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, the flute is reported to be the embodiment of male power: men 'believed that the ability to wage war and dominate women, and thus to uphold the social order, rested with those who possessed [the flutes]' (p. 4). But we are unable to identify the Gimi flute—or any other Gimi 'phallic' symbol—as the embodiment of exclusive male qualities. The evidence for its androgynous, relational composition is found in Gimi mythology. According to Gimi women's myth, the First Man had a very long penis, which he carried coiled within a string bag. The string bag hung from his neck so that it 'protruded in a lump over his belly' (p. 7). Such a man might very well be said to be pregnant with his own penis, or to be carrying it around with him like an infant in a string bag or like a foetus—or both.

The myth told about this man is as follows. While the man lay fast asleep inside his house, his penis awoke 'out of hunger' and went out alone to search for the vagina. The penis was blind but followed his nose into the woman's house, where she was fast asleep and her vagina closed. The penis searched in vain for the opening and finally 'ate a part of the hole to open it...entered and ejaculated'. The woman awoke with a start and took the penis in her hand. She walked to the man's house and, while he still lay sleeping, cut his penis to the length of a section and a half of sugar-cane, throwing the huge severed portion into a river. The blood of the maimed giant was the blood of the first menses (pp. 10-11). Gillison pairs this myth with the male myth of the origin of the flute, in which the first couple was composed of a woman and a boy who were sister and brother. One night, the cries of the woman's flute awoke the 'small boy' asleep in the men's house and he crawled to her house, hiding himself in the tall grass outside her door. In the morning, after his sister had gone to her garden, the boy crept into her house and stole her flute from the head of her bed or, as told in other versions, he took it from the grass where she had left it. When he put the instrument to his mouth to play, he found that she had closed the blowing hole with a plug of her pubic hair. The boy's lips touched the plug and his sister's hair began to grow around his mouth, which is why men nowadays have beards. By stealing the flute, the boy not only acquired a beard; he also caused his sister to menstruate for the first time. But when she saw that her flute was gone and heard it 'crying' inside the men's house, she was not angry and did not try to take it back: 'she forgot everything that happened and died' (ibid.: 10). Gillison concludes: 'analyzed together, men's and women's myths reciprocally imply that, in the very first instance, before time began...only the other sex "had the penis," only the other was grown-up and possessed sexual appetite' (p. 12). In these myths and in all of Gimi social imagery, we are unable to attribute specific organs, or their functions, or specific consumptive or sexual acts to one sex or the other. Both men and women have penes and vaginas, both men and women emit sound and substance and receive or consume such emissions, both men and women are consumers as well as consumed. There is no sexual difference in any form familiar to us. In fact, in Marilyn Strathern's words (1988: 107), for the Gimi 'maleness and femaleness seem defined to the extent in which persons appear as detachable parts of others or as encompassing them'.

The strength of Gillison's analysis is the manner in which she identifies a core image of the Gimi life condition and shows how it expands through various social protocols into its mythopoeic, ritual and social processual forms. A bride carries with her in her net bag her father's sacred flute, which he has filled with cooked meat. She is unaware of what she carries and thinks only that it is a container of salt. The husband, however, knows what her bag holds. He removes the flute and extracting the meat, places it in his bride's mouth. In one of the many passages where Gillison deftly weaves together the many different forms of the primordial flute image, she writes (p. 16):

in enacting the unspoken content of their own myth, acknowledging that the flutes the groom takes from the bride, and the things he removes from the mouths of the flutes, are phallic or father-derived objects, men play out a fantasy that closely resembles the explicit counterpremise of women's myth, in which the heroine removes the head of a giant penis. Through the transfer of flutes, men set up a connection with women's myth that they undo as soon as the exchange is made.

The recursiveness and ubiquity of this image, and its ability to retain its own scale throughout these expansions, is evidence of a local strategy of meaning revelation that cannot be captured by a structuralist account alone. Rather, it must be characterized by a technique that does not separate perception from its bodily constitution, that sees social relationship itself as a function of the body's superficialities and conaesthetic faculty. Although the theoretical framework that would account for this technique is not explicitly addressed in Gillison's book, the debt to Freud and Winnicott (e.g. 1964, 1971) is clear.

It is evident that in both the Gimi and Etoro cases—and, I think, throughout Papua New Guinea and Melanesia—what we call gender difference emerges around a perception of contrasting relationships to consumptive acts and protocols; it is interesting to note that both the Gimi and the Etoro say that the father 'feeds' the foetus in his wife's uterus by depositing semen inside her. These consumptive acts are the productive system of these societies. If, as Gillison does, we intimate that these acts are the forms that human desire and passion take in their social manifestation, then it is appropriate for us to speak of the Gimi and Etoro 'economic' systems as constituted by what G. Deleuze and F. Guattari (1986) call 'desiring production'. To separate out the acts of distribution and control of resources from this embodied production, as do Collier and Rosaldo, and as Kelly must also do if only to be arguing on the same terms, is perhaps to do an analytic injustice to the societies under consideration.

Gillison and Kelly speak directly to each other through these different perspectives on interior New Guinea gender articulation. In speaking to each other, they reveal the unmistakably bodily constitution of what we can call the politics of selfhood and gender in Papua New Guinea.

#### REFERENCES

- BATESON, GREGORY 1958 [1936]. *Naven: A Survey of the Problems Suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe Drawn from Three Points of View* (2nd edn.), Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- COLLIER, JANE F., and MICHELLE Z. ROSALDO 1981. 'Politics and Gender in Simple Societies', in Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (eds.), *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 275–329.

- DELEUZE, GILLES, and FÉLIX GUATTARI 1986. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (transl. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane), London: Athlone Press.
- HERDT, GILBERT H., and FITZ JOHN P. POOLE 1982. "Sexual Antagonism": The Intellectual History of a Concept in New Guinea Anthropology', *Social Analysis*, no. 12, pp. 3-28.
- KELLY, RAYMOND C. 1976. 'Witchcraft and Sexual Relations: An Exploration in the Social and Semantic Implications of the Structure of Belief', in P. Brown and G. Buchbinder (eds.), *Man and Woman in the New Guinea Highlands*, Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association (Special Publication No. 8), pp. 36-53.
- STRATHERN, MARILYN 1988. *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- WINNICOTT, D. W. 1964. *The Child, the Family and the Outside World* (Pelican Books) Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- ... 1971. *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock Publications.