

The Sexual Boundary - Purity: Heterosexuality
and Virginity.

The present paper is part of a larger essay concerned with the position of women in social anthropology. In this essay I investigate sexual categories in terms of relationship, boundary and content rather than groups or individuals, since this gives us more freedom to make generalizations, and my aim is a very general one indeed. I need not, I think, give this paper any further introduction, since both the aim and the scope will be apparent from the following pages.

Since Douglas (1966) wrote on purity and danger it has become clear that boundaries are very important to order, and indeed all-important to the conception of social and cultural categories, of which the male/female ones constitute one antithetical set.

Douglas herself investigates the implications of her theory in relation to the sexual distinction (1966, especially chapter 9), and although I would have liked to cite many of her arguments at length, I shall abstain from this and turn to a more general use of "boundarism" as such. Although the actual border-line between the sex-categories is somewhere explicit, spatially or linguistically, it may also be covert within other relationships, or it may even seem to be non-existent as a line at all on the level of empirical reality. This is just a preliminary warning that the boundary of this chapter denotes boundarism in general. The purity and danger of the sex-categories thereby become relative not only to the ethnographic context but also to the theoretical level of discussion. This will become clearer in the course of analysis.

The notions of purity and danger are from the outset loaded with implications for both eidos and ethos (cf. Bateson, 1936) since they not only are used metaphorically for structure and anti-structure, but almost by definition simultaneously designate an antithetical set of emotions also. This should be kept in mind at places, where it is not possible to disentangle conceptual from emotional disorder, even not intellectually **by the analyst, and of course sympathetically impossible to the natives** of our examples, who are sometimes ourselves.

Let us first consider the "normal" order of things, concerning sex-categories. On the level of behaviour, the notion of heterosexuality expresses what to most people and in most situations is considered appropriate sexual behaviour. In this sense, heterosexuality is pure; it is not loaded with emotional ambivalence; it is orderly and proper in any sense of these words. But what is then heterosexuality?

As said, on the level of behaviour there is no ambiguity, since it designates the normal sexual union of a man and a woman. It is a natural relation, when men's and women's reproductive differentiation is considered. On a higher level: namely the cultural, as opposed to the natural of this context, heterosexuality denotes a potential unity through the duality of the conceptual categories of male and female. These categories are everywhere as distinct as are the reproductive functions, although in different ways, and for different reasons the conceptual complementarity of the two categories (yin and yang) leads us with reasonable certainty to presume that there is no conceptual ambiguity on the level of the cognitive structure, as there was no emotional ambivalence towards this kind of sexual relation on the level of behaviour, not as part of the culturally standardized pattern, anyway.

We shall now take one further step and proceed to an investigation of the conceptual definition of the meaning of the sex-categories, that is not only their bounding from each other, but also their different contents, since this can be done very lucidly in terms of boundarism. Till now, we have taken a universal unambiguity and distinctiveness of the two sex-categories for granted, and this holds good at a certain level of conceptual oppositions, formally as well as functionally. But in terms of purity and danger this can no longer remain unchallenged in relation to meaning. Our entry into this subject will be through a rather elaborate empirical example of rare consistency and beauty, and whose potential for wide generalizations may be even greater.

Among the Tewa Indians described by Ortiz (1969), the standard phrase of encouragement to a man, who is about to undertake a dangerous or demanding task, is: "be a woman, be a man", while the corresponding remark to a woman simply is: "be a woman". This interesting point has got parallels in other spheres of the socio-cultural reality, most important in connection with the moiety system.

The Tewa moieties are not exogamous units, they are just ritual divisions of the society, reflecting a fundamental dual principle of classification. This of course is not unique to the Tewa, nor is it unique that the moieties are associated with the sex-categories, but it is almost unique that these sex-categories should be so defined as they are among the Tewa. Before discussing this noteworthy sexual classification, I shall give a brief outline of some relevant facts about the Tewa.

As a starting point one may look at the child's gradual growth into a full member of the society, which among other things implies three rites of passage, all of them most appropriately characterized as rites of incorporation. Without a detailed elaboration of the rites and symbols, we note that the child on the fourth day after birth goes through the first of these rites: the naming ritual. This is borne out by the "umbilical cord-cutting mother" and her assistant, who acted as midwives four days earlier. By this rite, throughout which the dualistic theme is repeated, the child is not only bestowed with a name, but is thereby also incorporated into the society at large.

During the first year of life, the child has to go through a second rite of incorporation: the water-giving rite. This time the child is incorporated into a specific moiety. The moieties are named the Winter- and the Summer-moiety, respectively, and it is the Winter-chief who precedes the rite for the Winter-children, during the half-year period in which he holds the responsibility for the whole village. The Summer-chief will take care of the Summer-children in the course of his reign. Apart from other highly interesting differences in the moiety-specific symbolism, there is one difference which is immediately striking when viewed within a sexual context, and this relates to the selection of sponsors to the child: whereas Summer-parents are bound to choose a sponsor of the same sex as their child, the Winter-parents are not.

"A part of the reason for this interesting divergence is that while the Winter and Summer moieties are identified with maleness and femaleness, respectively, the qualities of both sexes are believed to be present in men, while women are only women" (Ortiz, 1969, p. 36). This message was already implicit in the initial citation of the remarks of encouragement, but we are now able to express it in more general terms. The Summer moiety and the female category represent sexual specificity, while the Winter moiety

and the male category are sexually generalized. At one level the opposition of the antithetical categories of male and female is unambiguous and symmetrical, as in the direct opposition of the two moieties, for instance, but at another level when meaning is considered, the relation turns into an asymmetrical one.

This fact is also expressed in the titulation of the different chiefs: the Winter chief is referred to as father during his ruling period, but as mother during the rest of the year, when the Summer chief is in charge. The latter is, on the other hand, always referred to as mother, never father.

The incorporation of the child into the moieties thus revealed some interesting points concerning the sexual classification, as in fact did the naming rite, when the spirits addressed were requested for help in bringing a boy into womanhood and into manhood, while the wish for a female infant is that she may be brought into womanhood, only.

The third important rite of incorporation for a child consists of the incorporation into a sex-category. Although the two preceding rites did include sexual and sex-specific symbolism, it is only through this last rite that the child is conferred properly to one of the two sex-categories. This third rite actually consists in a couple of separate ceremonies, spaced over several years, but it is nevertheless reasonable to regard it as one rite of incorporation: namely into a sexual category. The spacing of this rite can be seen as an expression of a clash between an analogue and a digital conception of the child/adult contrast, where the analogue concerns roles, rights and duties in the social practice, while the digital concerns conceptual categories.

From the moment of the first part of the rite: the water-pouring rite, the child, who is between 6 and 10 years of age, is given sex-specific duties to carry out. This rite is thus the first one to distinguish the children by sex (socially), and they gradually get heavier and more important tasks from then on. But they are not totally culturally distinguished by sex until another rite, the finishing rite, is held some years later, when the child is definitely included not only into a sex-category, but also into the sex-specific ritual life of his particular moiety.

To summarize, we may see each of these three rites as steps of a binary key, upon each of which one of two possibilities is chosen (not by "free choice", of course). The first choice is Tewa or non-Tewa, the next is Winter moiety or Summer moiety, the third choice concerns male or female.

Not only is the position of the child thus gradually made more specific, but at each new step the previous choices are reinforced. Although the child is a Tewa from the moment of the naming-rite, he is more so when he has been through the water-giving rite, and wholly so when through the finishing rite. This last name alone is revealing. The same cumulative effect holds good for the moiety-incorporation, which is not total, until the child has been through the last rite of sexual incorporation, since it is only then that he can take part in the sex-specific ritual life of the moiety.

Although the incorporation into moieties and sex-categories is not explicitly established until the second and the third rite, respectively, it is implicitly pre-established by the foregoing rites, since e.g. the sexual symbolism indirectly classifies the child sexually already at the first and second rites. We might draw a diagram to express the cumulative

effect of the three rites:

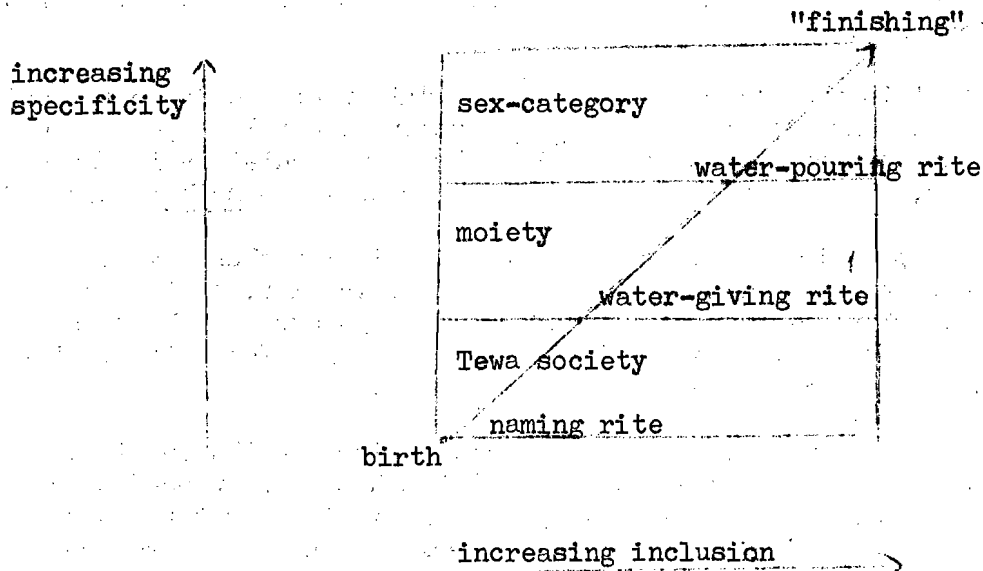


Fig.1.

Apart from the joy of finding patterns within good ethnographies, this elaboration of the Tewa example brings a very important contribution to our subject, which at present is to draw a boundary between (or to impose boundarism upon) the categories of male and female. But again, first a glance to the plane of analysis.

In our investigation we have to keep the social reality distinct from the structural reality. The patterns of the two may contradict each other, or at least they need not be direct mirror-images of one another, but they are nevertheless simultaneously present in social interactions and thought. A comparative sketch will illuminate this.

The Mae Enga of New Guinea regard women as highly polluting, even really dangerous (the men do, anyway), but this designation does not directly tell us about the meaning-content of the structural categories of men and women. It tells about an opposition of the social categories: the women are expelled by the social organization to the marginal (or anti-structural, in Douglas' sense) areas of the extreme patrilineal society, the "extremity" of which is partly defined by the conception of highly powerful marginal areas. This sexual opposition, which results in the sexual antagonism of the behaviour, belongs to the social pattern, and although the structural reality is located in the social pattern, it is only through analyses of the total sexual environment, including marriage and bridewealth etc., that we can find the conceptual meaning content of the structural sex-categories.

The Tewa, on the other hand, do not recognize any unilineal principle, which at the level of actually possible conflicts define the sexes in an a priori antagonistic relation to each other. Without social inter-sexual

conflicts and dangers, the Tewa are free to define a sexual opposition, which confines both sexes to the social order, as these are everywhere both represented in the cultural order. The social pattern thereby does not bar the insight into the structural reality of the conceptual categories, as it tends to do for the Mae Enga. But of course, it is rare that the meaning-content of the sexual categories is so overtly expressed as among the Tewa. To conclude: the Tewa have a dualistic social organization, which expresses a social pattern of symmetry between the sexes; but through social and ritual practice we gain insight into a conceptual and structural assymetry between the sex-categories. We know that this conceptual pattern is shared by the two sexes, and we are thus able to encircle "the hollow shape" (Ardener, 1973) of the Tewa cultural structure much more unambiguously than we are for the Mae Enga, and it is this cultural, or conceptual, structure which is our frame of reference in the following discussion.

Repeating the words phrased by the "umbilical cord-cutting mother" or any other "Mutter Courage" in Tewa society: "be a woman, be a man" to a man, and "be a woman" to a woman, reminds us that maleness is generalized, whereas femaleness is specific, pure, as it were. This is in striking accordance with biology, and we should recall the taxonomic relation between the 'man' and 'woman', which are both included in the notion of 'man' at a next higher level of contrast.

Time has come to draw attention to the fact that biology, or rather genetics, has serious bearings on this specific taxonomic inclusion. Man has the genetic potential of both sexes, while woman has only female x-chromosomes for the next generation. Thus the linguistic precedence of man is in some way founded upon - or at least parallel in genetics. At a certain level of contrast man is opposed to woman in a symmetrical fashion, as in the Tewa social pattern, and more generally in the biologically defined reproductive functions. At another and more covert level assymetry enters, as in genetic structure in general and in the Tewa conceptual structure in particular.

The Tewa conceptions of the sex-categories, then, strike a universally valid scheme of classification:

	genetics	Tewa
male	$x + y$	$q + \phi$
female	$x + x$	q

fig. 2

Thus, whereas the experienced model for direct heterosexual relations is one of distinct symmetrical opposition between man and woman, or between male and female, the contents of the distinct categories are not unambiguous opposites. There is a definite and important assymetry, which to some extent moves the boundary between the two sexes, compared to the experience of heterosexual opposition. This move has become

accepted within genetics, but it is worth seeing how it is situated there. The recent discoveries of "deviant" chromosomal equipment have caused a series of new interests in finding behavioural anomalies for these genetic deviances. It has been argued that men with an extra y-chromosome ($x + y + y$) are more "criminal" and violent than "normal" men, and that men with an extra x-chromosome ($x + x + y$) tend to be homosexual (!). These investigations, whose results cannot be taken seriously, since the correlations established at best are very uncertain, are nevertheless interesting, since they throw light upon the obsession with order, even within Western science. Genetic disorder is thought of as really and socially dangerous (criminality and violence) where it is only metaphorically and conceptually so.

If we should draw the logical relation between the specialized female and the generalized male, this can best be done by the aid of a Venn diagram, which is so constructed that the smaller of two concentric circles is included in the bigger one:

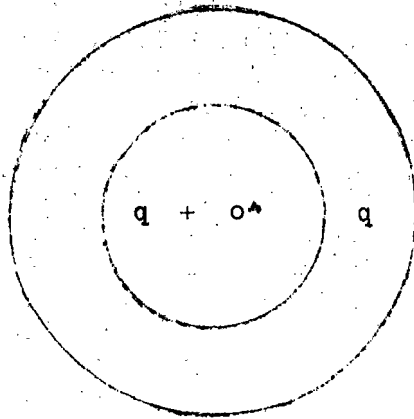


fig. 3

The inner circle is male, since its elements have male qualities in addition to the female qualities shared with all the elements of the big circle.

This asymmetrical relationship has a spatial parallel in, for instance, the Berber house (Bourdieu, 1971), which is at first sight divided into a male and a female part, but in which a closer inspection shows that the opposition male/female masks another: male, + female/female+ female. The inner section of the house, above the stable, is exclusively female, whereas the outer section is both male and female. I believe that this pattern of male/female = generalized/specific is a widely distributed pattern of intersexual relationship.

Now, one of Ortiz' arguments in his monograph is that there is nothing like a concentric dualism among the Tewa, let alone a triadic structure, as Lévi-Strauss suggests for any system of dual organization (Lévi-Strauss, 1956). It is tempting to draw attention to the fact that Ortiz, being a Tewa indian himself, perhaps more easily turns to the everywhere more overt dualist model, than to the covert triadic structure, which is the analyst's model. In any case, Ortiz' disagreement with Lévi-Strauss in this matter is partly factitious, since they operate at different levels of reality. The problem of dual organization is a very large one, and in the present connection I shall just argue that the Venn diagram drawn above (fig. 3) may bring new insight into this discussion.

One point, which Ortiz makes against Lévi-Strauss, is that the Tewa village is not spatially organized with a male center and a female periphery, which is so characteristic of many villages with (as the Bororo)

or without (as the Trobrianders) a dual social organization. This is true, but it is likewise true that the conceptual representation of the sexual categories only could be spatially represented with a male ($q+o$) center and a female (q) periphery, as the Venn diagram shows it. The Tewa have not chosen to do so in their villages, but they certainly express this asymmetric (triadic) relationship in many other ways, and we are not allowed to expect that the cultural structure is everywhere laid out on the ground.

If we turn the argument upside down, we could reasonably argue that the rather common opposition between male and female, expressed as the opposition between center (or inner circle) and periphery (or outer circle) in the village organization, does everywhere express an opposition between a generalized and a specialized sex. The specialized female sex, which is of course given varying social and cultural attributes, is in general terms specialized for internal purposes in the society. The generalized male sex not only contributes to internal well-being of the society, (whether more or less than the women, in terms of actual contributions to subsistence, does not matter here), but it is also the men who take care of external relations by exchange of women, valuables or hostilities. Thus, internally men are opposed to women in matters of production and reproduction in a symmetrical way, since they fulfill complementary roles, but externally the men alone represent the society as generalized representatives of both sexes.

Although the Tewa case might not have a direct contribution to Lévi-Strauss' argument of concentric dualism etc., we must maintain that it somehow adds a hidden dimension to this model anyway, a fact which was especially illuminated by seeing the case from the other side.

This point of the concentric dualism being a sexual dualism in this asymmetrical way is highly illustrative of the potentiality for the two types of relations: hierarchy and equality (or symmetry), the co-existence of which is noted in dual organization by e.g. Crocker, 1969; The primarily antithetical notions of man and woman gives room for symmetry or equality, whereas their synthetic inclusion into a higher level gives substance to hierarchy. The state of relationship is thus potent with both types of relations between the sex-categories. Which one (if either) will dominate when and where is a matter for empirical investigation; but it remains a matter of cultural structure, not of social practice, since the principles of hierarchy and equality belong there.

Some may find that we have left the matter of boundaries and purity very far behind, but the preceding discussion of maleness and femaleness among the Tewa and in more general terms has nevertheless been important for its own sake, and on the question of virginity, which I shall deal with below. Before proceeding to this interesting topic, we shall just summarize that in the most general terms possible, the woman is the pure sex. Establishing boundaries is to establish distinct categories, and on the very general (universal?) level of conception femaleness is distinct and unambiguous, whereas maleness is ambiguous as both/and.

Defining women as pure and men as dangerous sounds partly well-known; in western culture this kind of statement belongs (also) to our conscious models, and as such it is emotionally loaded and not a neutral statement of structural (genetic) classification. However well-known to western ears it is contrary to ethnographic evidence, which more often than not bestows the dangerous powers upon the women, in the conscious models. The

female danger is especially connected with the woman's sexuality and her biology at large. The emotional charter in these cases may be related to the folk-definitions of the women as "in between". If this is the case, we may see the sexual relation as reflecting the principle of hierarchy, which apparently then has been "chosen" in the articulate models. This is true of e.g. the Melpa (Strathern, 1972) and almost any New Guinean society, which on the other hand does not possess an established political hierarchy. The Bemba (Richards, 1956), on the other hand, believe in a mutual sexual pollution, and they do thereby express a principle of symmetry in the intersexual relationship; they have, however, a highly developed political hierarchy. Different spheres of reality may thus express different structural principles, but we must assume that some kind of correspondence between the various levels of experience is established, as Douglas (1970) suggests. This means that both of the principles must exist in the generative structure, which then act as transformer of contradicting experiences, making these mutually comprehensive. Maybe the conceptual categories of male and female and their meaning-content lie at the root of this.

Although danger and disorder is the way for gaining insight into purity and order, we shall try to confine ourselves a bit more to purity, leaving pollution proper (!) aside for the moment. And this means that we look upon the conscious models of this boundary.

Turning back to the articulation of woman as pure, contrary to man, this may well be a reflection of an unconscious classificatory scheme as developed above. In "moral" (articulate emotional) terms, her purity is related to chastity and self-control, both of which express that the woman is defined by and confined to internal functions in the society. A woman's chastity is not only her own virtue, it is part of the society's internal virtues as well. This gets a very tangible expression in some cultures, where it becomes related to a wider scheme of honour and shame, but it may also yield literary rather than literal expressions, as in Victorian England. Here (and then) the woman was fit only as inspiration for poets and painters, since she was far elevated from this-worldly matters such as polluted money and dirty politics.

Romantic love and the dream about the only one loomed large, and made men suffer, because the beloved one was out of reach (together with her dowry, maybe, since Goody (1973) suggests a correlation between dowry and a tendency to monogamy and "love-marriage") If she accidentally was not out of reach, conjugal life might make men suffer anyway, when the wife's purity became a matter of routine. Still, the idealized picture was a pure woman, whose child-births did not destroy her purity, rather added to it. One is led to believe that this conception of purity not only is related to the woman's internal virtues, but especially those among them which confine her to the specificity of her nature, as opposed to the men's societal occupations and obligations. We return to the problem of nature versus culture when considering female symbolism, but why nature should be pure in this case is partly explained by the ever more industrialized culture. It is the purity of Henry D. Thoreau as opposed to the danger of Henry Ford.

Female purity may in some cultures be much more directly expressed in terms of a general concern with the woman's sexual affairs, of which there preferably should be none before or outside marriage in many cases. This may pose no severe problem in societies where girls are married off at the moment of physical maturity or even before, but where this is not

the case the maintenance of virginity will demand much more self-control and investment of female pride, shall the girl not be tempted to unlock her chastity-belt.

The chastity of women is often of concern to a society, since any internal pollution of a woman (that is any illegitimate sexual affair) is an internal pollution of the society. In strongly endogamous groups such as the Indian castes, this is particularly true (Yalman, 1963). The purity of the caste is dependent on the purity of the women, since it is through them that caste-membership is transmitted. Elsewhere it is only particular women, who are bound to remain virgins until marriage. For instance, on Samoa (Mead, 1928), it concerns only the daughter of the chief, and her virginity alone becomes a symbol of the integrity of the society.

Whether chastity is demanded for all of the women of the community or only the one superior woman, it always acts as a means of establishing distinct categories. Another example of this is the occurrence of sibling-marriage, which is known especially within royal or chiefly families throughout the world, and which may be interpreted as an expression of extreme concern of the distinctiveness of the group.

Virginity and chastity do not only have a symbolic function in relation to the group or the society, it certainly also has a practical meaning to the persons involved. If virginity is expected at marriage, and it is the men who exchange women, then the women's virginity becomes part of the deal. The men are the ones to get their exchange spoiled if the woman is not a virgin at marriage, and they are the ones who lose their honour if she is not. Although this of course may lead to sanctions against the woman, who may primarily stay out of illegitimate sexual relations because of the threat of physical sanctions, the woman as a person is, nevertheless, in a key-position. She has to do her part of the play, but if she does not want to do so, the men can do nothing (except beating her, of course). To use van Baal's terms (van Baal 1970) women are not only objects, they have to agree to behave like objects, too, and if they don't, men will lose some objects for exchange. The marginality of women in the marriage exchange thus results in a much more powerful position, than the ideological models lead us to believe.

Phrased otherwise, women are not only men's game, they have to play men's game, too. However the content of this statement is evaluated, and radical feminists might not like it, there is at least one obvious reason for introducing the term: game. This immediately expresses ambiguity (cf. Leach, 1964), and thus ambiguity is also characteristic of the position of women in the marriage trade: they are both persons and currency, as Douglas (1966) states, or they are both signs and values, as Levi-Strauss (1949) says.

Playing the game in some societies requires that the women are very conscious about it. The Zulu girls (Krige, 1968), for whom there is a considerable delay of marriage due to the age-grade system, invest a lot of pride in their virginity, most dramatically expressed in their joint militancy towards a seducer.

We may conclude the preceding section on virginity by saying that the purity it represents, apparently always is spoiled by a man. In ideological terms this could be used as a justification for declaring

war on men, as the Zulu girls do, but if we leave the level of conscious models, then we must admit that this (emotional) reason for sexual warfare somehow fades away.

Returning to the level of conceptual structure, that is, shows us that virginity is not classificatorily unambiguous, (although morally so). Women defy categorical specificity until fully female by sexual association with a man, as the Tewa-case also demonstrates. The Tewa have a third "sex-category" for virgins, since they are not yet specified as women. Interestingly enough, the two mythological founders of the Tewa society are the White Corn Woman and the Blue Corn Maiden, representing the female Summer moiety and the male Winter moiety, respectively. From this and from other evidence, as e.g. the colour symbolism, it is clear that the pure specified woman is opposed to the yet unspecified virgin, potent of both sexes.

Thus, the moral purity may be transformed into a classificatory danger. In some cases this gets expressed in a socially powerful position of virgins. I believe that this was the case of Joan of Arc. "The Virgin of Orléans". Joan of Arc would never have succeeded her campaign in the first place, had she not been really or symbolically a virgin. Her power originated in her ambiguous sexual classification. No men would have followed her had she been just a woman. Her ambiguity was actually manifold, as Douglas describes it: although she does not mention the aspect of virginity, and that this ambiguity in the last place became the sad fate of Joan of Arc, since she was burnt as a witch, is fully comprehensible. (cf. Douglas, 1966, p.124).

If virginity at a certain level is ambiguous, virgin birth is certainly always anomalous. As Leach (1966) states, the anomaly of a mother, who is also a virgin, makes her apt for a role as symbolic mediator, e.g. between men and their god. The Virgin Mother of christianity occupies different positions within the different symbolic systems of catholicism and protestantism, but this fact just affirms the different social orders that prevail, as Leach (1966) demonstrates. Her initial and basic function as a mediator between people and God remains the same.

Due to its greater anomaly, virgin motherhood is an even more potent symbol, than is just virginity, which is only ambiguous at a certain level. The case of virgin motherhood is more overtly anomalous, and as a symbol it may become more consciously manipulated, or at least get more easily interpreted in the right terms, by the people it concerns, than could be the case of virginity as such. This interpretation need not actually be articulate in the present terms, but the very strong folk-adherence to the symbol of the Virgin Mother, at least in catholic countries, shows its direct and immediate potency. The difference in potency of these two symbols of virginity and virgin motherhood can also be read as follows: the virgin may mediate sexual categories, while the virgin mother may mediate between humans and non-humans.

Purity has been the central theme of this paper but I have repeatedly touched upon the problem of danger. The two notions are really two sides of the same coin, and concentrating on purity only took us halfway along the sexual boundary. Consequently, danger remains.¹

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1. This is the first part of a two-part article. The second part will appear in the next issue of the Journal.

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