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978-0-521-28001-3 - Nature, Culture and Gender

Edited by Carol P. MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern

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Edited by

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Contents

List of plates	<i>page</i> vi
Preface	vii
1 Nature, culture and gender: a critique Carol P. MacCormack	1
2 Women and the dialectics of nature in eighteenth-century French thought Maurice Bloch and Jean H. Bloch	25
3 Natural facts: a historical perspective on science and sexuality L.J. Jordanova	42
4 The power of signs: gender, culture and the wild in the Bolivian Andes Olivia Harris	70
5 Proto-social to adult: a Sherbro transformation Carol P. MacCormack	95
6 Gender, sexuality and marriage: a Kaulong model of nature and culture Jane C. Goodale	119
7 Images of nature in Gimi thought Gillian Gillison	143
8 No nature, no culture: the Hagen case Marilyn Strathern	174
Index	223

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Plates

3.1	French eighteenth-century wax figure	<i>page</i> 55
3.2	French eighteenth-century wax figure with the covering of the trunk removed	56
4.1	<i>Wayli</i> marching to battle	76
4.2	A sponsor of carnival	82
5.1	Duiker mask	101
5.2	Hippopotamus mask	102
5.3	Duiker and hippopotamus masked figures, dancing	103
5.4	Humanoid masked figures	104
5.5	The Ndenkema	107
5.6	The co-leaders of Thoma	110
5.7	Kose, the woman co-leader of Thoma	115
7.1	Ceremonial preparation of an earth oven	151
7.2	Side-blown flutes played by men	155
7.3	Young men dressed as female initiates	166
8.1	A garden freshly made from old fallow	197
8.2	A woman committing a pig to ceremonial exchange	201
8.3	Ceremonial exchange	207
8.4	Ceremonial exchange	210

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978-0-521-28001-3 - Nature, Culture and Gender
Edited by Carol P. MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

The book was conceived in Swansea at the 1977 meeting of the Association of Social Anthropologists. We listened to Harris's paper in which she mentioned that married couples were the social category considered fully cultural in Laymi society. Chatting afterward about the assumption that nature is to culture as female is to male, one of us (MacCormack) mentioned that on the basis of her field work, the gender part of the equation did not seem universally valid. The other (Strathern) made the more radical suggestion that on the basis of her field work, she could not subscribe to the putative universality of the nature–culture categories themselves. We had been stimulated by ideas in important articles by Ardener, and Ortner, in which the nature–culture and female–male analogy was explicitly, though very differently, developed. Why were we so fascinated by those theoretical propositions? Jordanova, then a research fellow in history and philosophy of science, gave us insights into some of the assumptions of our own intellectual tradition. On another occasion, while co-examining a pile of student scripts with Maurice Bloch, and wishing to talk about anything but the chore before us, we turned to nature, culture and Rousseau. Jean Bloch, a lecturer in French, then added her valuable perspective.

In addition to this process of 'cultural self-analysis', we felt the need for a 'second opinion' from ethnographers interested in folk definitions of nature and gender. Jane Goodale had long ago raised a query about the Ortner paradigm, a query she elaborates here. Gillian Gillison worked in the same geographical region as Marilyn Strathern, but among people whose cultural constructs could not be more different from those in Strathern's Mt Hagen area. Our thinking had also been influenced by Nicole-Claude Mathieu's 1973 article in *L'Homme*, and we were disappointed when the pressure of work precluded her contributing a chapter to the book.

Our invitation to the various contributors was simply to reflect upon the manner in which anthropologists especially have used the concepts of nature and culture in the exegesis of other peoples' gender symbolism. While we have been concerned to bring together a collection of essays focussed on a single theme, this has not been a collective endeavour, and no single line of argument has been imposed on the contributions. Indeed, in

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)viii *Preface*

the first place each was written largely independently of the others. They thus represent the meeting of diverse interests; at the same time most at one point or other relate their own arguments to the monumental works of Lévi-Strauss, as well as the inspiration of Ardener on the one hand and Ortner on the other. Although the resultant and numerous citations might give the impression that we are treating these authors' writings as some kind of 'text', we would rather be understood to be using them as exemplars. The ideas of nature and culture, though employed with varying intention, are encountered in their works as explicit analytical devices. If they have drawn, as anthropology must, on philosophical constructs embedded in our own cultural tradition, they have also – unwittingly or no – stimulated an easy acceptance of the conclusion that to illuminate other people's thought systems in such terms yields an ultimate insight into what other 'cultures' imagine they are all about.

That it is necessary to go over again ground long traversed by other disciplines, and by anthropology itself in the old nature–nurture debate, comes directly from the current interest in conceptualisations of gender which has followed the discovery of 'women' as an analytical category. This is not of course restricted to anthropology – far from it; anthropology thrives on and in turn feeds widespread contemporary concern with gender studies. One theme which emerges quite strongly from these essays is the self-consciousness of our own culture about its 'culture' in antithesis to nature, in the same way as many attempts at feminist analysis are predicated upon a self-consciousness about the category 'woman', in antithesis to man. Indeed, these two concerns may be brought into explicit conjunction. So although this book is framed in a largely anthropological idiom, by asking how and to what end we sometimes resort to notions of nature and culture in our explication of gender formulations, it touches on issues much more widely located in the world we inhabit.

The Women in Society Research Seminar at Cambridge organized by Elena Lieven and Marthe Macintyre commented constructively on three of the chapters. We also wish to thank members of anthropology seminars at Cambridge, the London School of Economics, Oxford, Sussex, UCLA, and the Collège de France for commenting on some of these chapters. Our ideas are our own responsibility, but the lively response from colleagues gave the encouragement necessary to see the task through.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ix *Preface*

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