

Introduction

This book offers certain answers to some basic questions regarding male and female power. These answers are necessarily tentative, because there are few more difficult questions about human relationships than those about the relationship of the two sexes. Throughout history and among various societies, human beings seem to have handled this relationship in an almost infinite variety of ways. Modern scholarship, particularly as represented by anthropologists, has tended to bifurcate the reasons underlying this reality into two opposites. Starkly put, the dichotomy has been nature versus nurture. In order to get out from under the weight of these polarities, I have tried to frame my questions in the most neutral possible mode. Why, for example, do women play a more prominent role in some societies than in others? Why do men dominate women, either as individuals or as a group? Why do some societies clothe sacred symbols of creative power in the guise of one sex and not of the other?

For several reasons, finding answers to these questions has not been easy. As an anthropologist I have been committed to the task of systematically establishing the full range of variation in male and female power roles before trying to explain this variation. This commitment has meant that I have had to rely on a representative sample of the world's known and well-described societies. I chose more than 150 of these societies for which detailed descriptions are available.¹ Missionaries, colonial officials, and anthropologists provided these descriptions of societies widely divergent in geographical, historical, and social circumstances. These societies are little known and, in many cases, are now extinct. From them, however, we have much to learn about the nature of female power and the reasons for male dominance.

This book is intended for an interdisciplinary audience interested in a global view of female power and male dominance in

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tribal societies. The following pages present many examples showing the range of variation in the relations between the sexes. In addition, numerous tables display the frequency of male dominance and female power in different environmental, social, and religious settings.

Unfortunately, most of the sources on which I had to rely, which range from the sixth century B.C. to the present, were written by males who paid cursory attention to female attitudes and behavior in the societies they described. As a rule, Western observers of other societies have not thought of women as important contributors to culture. However, despite this paucity of information on the female side of life (in many but not all cases), descriptions of male attitudes and behavior toward women provided important clues to the relationship between the sexes. There are clear differences between societies in which men fear and oppress women and societies in which the sexes intermingle in a friendly way in most activities of everyday life.

The view that emerges in this book is unconventional in that it conforms to no particular theoretical perspective or current style of thinking. Although the legacies of Durkheim, Marx, and Freud haunt the explanatory sections, I did not begin by testing any of the theories associated with these men. Rather, I began by immersing myself in the descriptive material, trying to keep an open mind and a receptive ear to what the actions of men and women in widely different circumstances might suggest regarding the questions I had posed. At the same time I reread the work of Ruth Benedict on cultural selection, Margaret Mead on sex roles, Clifford Geertz on sacred symbols, and Mary Douglas on implicit meanings while trying to keep up with the burgeoning literature written by anthropologists on relative sex status.

The following scenario about male and female power, and the origins of male dominance, does not attempt to summarize all that has been written. Nor do I intend to test one theory and reject others. There is something to be learned from most anthropological treatises on relative sex status. Yet none of them examines the full range of possibilities in a worldwide context. In examining this range, my goal is to focus on why cultures select different styles of interaction between the sexes.

The central argument unfolds by posing questions regarding cultural selection. I assume, as Ruth Benedict said long ago in *Pat-*

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terms of Culture, that each culture “selects” or “chooses” from the “great arc” of behavioral possibilities. Human beings, Benedict wrote, build their institutions “upon the hints presented by the environment or by man’s physical necessities.”² How human beings staff these institutions, the freedom and autonomy they grant women relative to men, I argue, is part of a complex interaction between environmental considerations and physical and emotional needs as people construct the “cup of life” Benedict called “culture.”

In *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, Margaret Mead argued that cultural selection included the standardization of temperamental types. Within each culture, Mead noted, there is the same range of basic temperamental types established on the basis of heredity. These differences provide “the clues from which culture works, selecting one temperament, or a combination of related and congruent types, as desirable.” The choice of the acceptable temperamental type or types was embodied in “every thread of the social fabric – in the care of the young child, the games the children play, the songs the people sing, the structure of political organization, the religious observance, the art and the philosophy.”³

In addition to selecting approved temperamental types, I suggest, each culture must select a sex-role plan – that is, a template for the organization of sex-role expectations. Because human behavior is so plastic and responsive to many kinds of pressures, as Clifford Geertz says, people must set up “symbolic templates” to set the limits of behavior and to guide it along predictable paths.⁴ Sex-role plans form one kind of symbolic template. Such plans help men and women orient themselves as male and female to each other, to the world around them, and to the growing boys and girls whose behavior they must shape to a commonly accepted mold.

In addition to guiding behavior, sex-role plans solve basic human puzzles. Human beings seek answers to such questions as where did we come from; how did we get here; how did others get there; what is our relationship with all the others out there – others being animate, inanimate, and human objects; and what are we to do about the powerful forces within any of these categories not fully understood. Confronted with the obvious, generally accepted, but frequently ignored facts that babies come out of fe-

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males and female genitals differ from male genitals, people seek to solve the puzzle of sex differences by sorting out how and why the differences came about, what is to be done about the differences, and how the two kinds of people resulting from the differences are to relate to one another and to their environment.

The emphasis in the early part of the book is on describing the symbolic and behavioral components of sex-role plans and showing their diversity. Later sections concern selection. Why do people construct different sex-role plans? Why is there sexual symmetry in some instances and asymmetry in others? Why are women viewed as a necessary part of political, economic, and religious affairs in some societies and not in others? Male dominance is not an inherent quality of human sex-role plans. In fact, the argument suggests that male dominance is a response to pressures that are most likely to have been present relatively late in human history.

The approach of this book represents something of a departure from the mainstream of anthropological analyses of sex roles and status. Much of the current work focuses on the exercise of power and authority in such traditional arenas of anthropological analysis as kinship, marriage, economics, and politics. Increasingly, a positivist framework is employed in which the causes of relative sex status are assigned to either psychological (usually Freudian) or materialist considerations.⁵

There is one notable exception to this general rule. In her analysis of the "universality of female subordination," Sherry Ortner depends "not upon specific cultural data but rather upon an analysis of 'culture' taken generically as a special sort of process in the world." One cannot fully comprehend the actual expression of male or female power, Ortner argues, "without first understanding the overarching ideology and deeper assumptions of the culture that render such powers . . ."⁶

By emphasizing basic cultural premises, Ortner's approach, like mine, begins with the ideational and asks how culture is related to sex status. Although I heartily endorse her approach, I cannot agree with Ortner's conclusion that women are universally assigned to the low ground of nature and men to the high ground of culture. Women are universally devalued, she says, because they are "seen as closer to nature than men, men being seen as more unequivocally occupying the high ground of culture."⁷ Because

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culture's job is to control nature, men are accorded the right to control women – hence, Ortner's conclusion regarding universal female subordination.

Ortner is close to being right about the permeability between the categories of female and nature (in some but not all societies). In societies where the forces of nature are sacralized, as the following pages show, there is a reciprocal flow between the power of nature and the power inherent in women. The control and manipulation of these forces is left to women and to sacred natural symbols; men are largely extraneous to this domain and must be careful lest they antagonize earthly representatives of nature's power (namely, women). Societies that have elaborated this type of relationship between nature and women I refer to as having an *inner orientation*.

Men are not universally aligned so unequivocally with the realm Ortner calls culture, "culture being minimally defined as the transcendence, by means of systems of thought and technology, of the natural givens of existence."⁸ On the contrary, in many cases men are inextricably locked into such natural givens as death, destruction, and animality. Just as women are sometimes merged with the powers of the *inner*, men are sometimes meshed with the powers of the *outer*. Men hunt animals, seek to kill other human beings, make weapons for these activities, and pursue power that is *out there*. In other words, when conditions are right, men are unequivocally part of an *outer orientation*.

Looking as an outsider at males and females in the simpler societies of the world – that is, in societies unencumbered by complex literate traditions – one is struck with the degree to which the sexes conform to a rather basic conceptual symmetry, which is grounded in primary sex differences. Women give birth and grow children; men kill and make weapons. Men display their kills (be it an animal, a human head, or a scalp) with the same pride that women hold up the newly born. If birth and death are among the necessities of existence, then men and women contribute equally but in quite different ways to the continuance of life, and hence of culture. The evidence presented in the following pages suggests that, all other things being equal, the power to give life is as highly valued as the power to take it away. The questions at issue are: 1) Why do some societies develop a symmetric as opposed to an asymmetric valuation of these two powers? and 2) How does a

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symmetric or an asymmetric valuation affect the secular power of men and women?

These questions are addressed in two stages. In the early part of the book, the focus is on symbolic manifestations of a people's sex-role plan, particularly on sacred symbols of creative power. The first three chapters establish a congruence between the gender of a people's creator god(s), their orientation to the creative forces of nature, and the secular expression of male and female power. Scripts for female power are described in Chapter 1. Such scripts accord feminine symbolism and women a prominent role in the sacred and secular domains. Chapter 2 presents metaphors for male dominance and female subordination. Generally speaking, when males dominate, women play an inconsequential role in the sacred and secular domains. Almost always in male-dominated societies, the godhead is defined in exclusively masculine terms. Chapter 3 begins raising questions about selection. How do peoples choose their creator god(s) and weave their orientation to nature? Some sort of orientation to the world, Geertz says, is necessary to formulate general ideas of order. Human beings need to know that "God is not mad" – at least not so mad as to destroy them in a fit of petulance. Because man's innate responses are so general, Geertz points out, symbols and cultural patterns are necessary to make men functionally complete. Without symbols and guidelines, man would be "not merely a talented ape who had, like some underprivileged child, unfortunately been prevented from realizing his full potentialities, but a kind of formless monster with neither sense of direction nor power of self-control, a chaos of spasmodic impulses and vague emotions."⁹ As Langer puts it:

[Man] cannot deal with Chaos . . . his greatest fright is to meet what he cannot construe . . . under mental stress even perfectly familiar things may become suddenly disorganized and give us the horrors. Therefore our most important assets are always the symbols of our general *orientation* in nature, on the earth, in society, and in what we are doing . . .¹⁰

In Chapter 3 I argue that the environment, human subsistence activities, and primary sex differences provide the clues that shape a people's conception of creative power and their orientation to nature. People weave their fantasies about power from their perception of the forces most responsible for what they conceive to be the necessities of life. If these forces revolve around migration and

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the pursuit of animals, an *outer orientation* becomes prominent. If nature satisfies a people's perception of their primary needs, an *inner orientation* takes precedence. In some cases, both orientations are equally developed.

In addition to orienting peoples to the forces in their universe, sex-role plans determine the sexual division of labor. Whether or not men and women mingle or are largely separated in everyday affairs plays a crucial role in the rise of male dominance. Men and women must be physically as well as conceptually separated in order for men to dominate women. Thus, in determining the conditions that select for male dominance, one must have some prior notion of the conditions favoring sexual segregation.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the bases for sexual separation or integration. Chapter 4 focuses on the sexual division of labor in technological activities, that is, in activities involving the acquisition and processing of food and making implements, houses, tools, utensils, and so on. Like the gender of a people's major creator(s), plans for the sexual division of labor are formed from a people's adaptation to their environment in pursuing the necessities of life. As such, these plans are part of the same cultural configuration that gives rise to masculine or feminine creator gods and an *inner* or *outer* orientation. Chapter 4 shows that, generally speaking, the sexes mingle in most activities when people perceive the environment as a partner rather than as an opponent. On the other hand, when the environment is defined in hostile terms, the sexes tend to separate from each other.

Chapter 5 extends the analysis of sexual separation to an examination of the belief, found in some societies, that menstrual blood and sexual intercourse are dangerous. The basic argument presented here draws on the work of Mary Douglas, who treats concepts of pollution and danger as a system of meaningful symbols in which the actual relationship between the sexes plays a negligible role. Following Douglas's suggestion that powers and dangers credited to bodily processes reflect more general fears, I suggest in this chapter that people provide themselves with a stage upon which to control dangerous forces confronting them by projecting their concerns onto the human, usually the female, body.

No matter how it is produced, sexual separation (for whatever reason) creates two worlds – one male and the other female, each consisting of a system of meanings and a program for behavior.

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Chapters 6 and 7 concentrate on the “women’s world.” Chapter 6 discusses the bases for female economic and political power. In societies displaying an *inner orientation*, females control goods and participate in group decision making as a natural extension of the social focus on inner power. In *outer-oriented* societies, female secular power is dependent on practical circumstances giving women access to scarce resources or making them responsible for the conduct of ritual. Where both orientations are evident, the inner and outer conceptions of sacred power support sexually balanced spheres of economic and political power.

When a people combats outside influences, the power of women may disintegrate as new metaphors for sexual identities replace the old and a new sexual division of labor gives men readier access to strategic resources. Examples of the effect of European colonialism on the women’s world are presented in Chapter 7. The case studies of the decline in female power presented in this chapter establish a causal relationship between depleting resources, cultural disruption, migration, and the oppression of women.

The rise of secular male dominance is taken up in Chapters 8 and 9. Secular male dominance is defined in terms of: 1) the physical coercion of women, as in wife beating or rape, and 2) the exclusion of women from political and economic activities. Why men dominate women in these ways is a complex question, for which no one answer suffices. In addressing this question it is important to distinguish between “mythical” and real male dominance. “Mythical” male dominance, a term adapted from the work of Susan Carol Rogers, captures the ambiguous and often antagonistic relationship between sexes in societies where females have political and economic power but men act as if males were the dominant sex. Real male dominance, on the other hand, applies to societies in which males dominate women both in theory and in fact. Sexual equality is a third category, in which the balance of power between the sexes is not obscured by the myth that males rule. Such an approach to the definition of male dominance illustrates at the level of secular politics that male supremacism or sexual asymmetry is not as widespread as some anthropologists have argued.

Chapter 8 confirms the relationship between male dominance and cultural disruption suggested in Chapter 7. Basically there are

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two responses to cultural disruption that have a significant impact on existing sex-role plans. One response is to fight to preserve or reinstate the past; another is to expand the domain of old symbols to control creeping chaos. Regarding the first response, men and not women embrace mass slaughter in defense of a dying tradition. Though a few women have died fighting for the women's world (see Chapter 7), the female role is not conceived in terms that make the acceptance of death in combat a possibility. Because the male role is conceived in these terms, the social body is sometimes entrusted to men as a reward for being the expendable sex. Obviously, if women willingly embraced mass slaughter, there would be no social body to preserve.

In cases of severe social stress or cultural disruption, the fighting takes on a different flavor. Instead of fighting the external oppressor, men band together and turn aggression against women. In these cases male dominance seems extreme because the whole of public life, that is, life that does not revolve around childrearing and family activities, becomes synonymous with the male collective. These primordially based male solidarities exhibit an uneasy strength because they are usually held together by fear of women. In simple societies, I suggest, such primordial attachments develop when culture breaks down, when societies are formed of a mixture of shreds and patches of other cultures, and when ancient power symbols have been drained of their efficacy. When male dominance is based on an exhausted or threatened cultural base, it is, in a sense, a reaction to loss of direction.

The behavioral and symbolic mechanisms for the establishment of male dominance are examined in Chapter 9. Drawing on the work of Mary Douglas and Margaret Mead, I trace the effects of depletion in animal resources, population expansion, and migration in six societies, three of which are male dominated and three of which are not. The purpose of this analysis is to show how a people's orientation to nature and their sacred symbols result in different solutions to stress. Male oppression of women is neither an automatic nor an immediate response to stress. Generally speaking, male dominance is based on a prior foundation formed by an *outer orientation* and sexual segregation.

Another major response to cultural disruption and growing chaos is to generate new symbols or to widen the domain that the gods control. In the Epilogue, I turn to an examination of the

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symbolic roots of Western sexual asymmetry. I suggest that the patriarchal Judeo-Christian god arose from the lesser figure of Yahweh during a time when pluralism was getting out of hand in Palestine. The Hebrew fathers expanded Yahweh's domain, I argue, in order to preserve the integrity of the social-religious-political identity formed by the exodus from Egypt. Women played an important role in this process because, in all likelihood, Canaanite goddess worship posed the greatest threat to the fledgling identity of the Hebrews in their new land. By raising Yahweh on high to control men, who in turn were charged to control women, the Hebrews reminded themselves that their mission in the new land was one of dominion and not of participation in the surrounding cultural pleasures.

Migrating peoples who take up an abode in a culturally pluralistic land live in a different social universe, as far as maintaining a recognized identity is concerned, than do settled agricultural groups in the same land whose long and deep-rooted ties to one place provide an easier security. Like so many of today's new states, migrating peoples are abnormally susceptible to the overpowering coerciveness of primordial attachments – that is, as Geertz says in discussing the new states, attachments based on the “givens” of social existence. Such givens supply the bonds people seize upon to define themselves in union against others – bonds provided by “congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on,” which have an ineffable coerciveness in and of themselves.¹¹

In the case of the Hebrews, the bonds came from religion and membership in one of the semi-nomadic tribes that settled in Palestine. The subsequent religious and ethnic struggles produced, among other things, the guiding symbols for Western male domination – the patriarchal god and the sexual, hence evil, female. In addition to discussing these symbols in Biblical popular culture, I consider in the Epilogue the fate of Gnostic beliefs in early Christianity. These episodes in the Judeo-Christian tradition were marked by warfare between advocates of the participation of women in the inner sacred sanctum and adherents of an all-masculine religious system. The forces resolving this conflict, I suggest in an admittedly speculative analysis, are not unlike those that have accompanied the selection for male dominance in other cultures. Today, after some 2,000 years of relative obscurity, goddess symbols like those present early in the Judeo-Christian tradition