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978-0-521-28075-4 - Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality

Peggy Reeves Sanday

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On the origins of sexual inequality

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PEGGY REEVES SANDAY

University of Pennsylvania



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*To Eric and Julie
with love*

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Preface

When I began this book, I intended to test the explanatory framework for the evolution of female status I had postulated in two published articles. My major question then was: What are the conditions under which the relative status of women changes in the direction of public equality? I assumed that, by and large, men were in a better position to gain both access to and control over strategic resources because of the constraints on the expenditure of female energy posed by their reproductive activities. This assumption corresponded with the then-prevailing view that women were universally subordinated. I hypothesized that women would gain public power by default, in the absence of men. Female power acquired in this fashion, I suggested, would be “legitimized over time through the expressive cultural system”; that is, through the development of female deities.¹

Supported by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health, I supervised the collection of information on over 150 societies in order to examine this view more closely.² It soon became evident that I had to revise my initial hypothesis. This sense of not having seen the forest for the trees was further confirmed upon reading the ethnographies of male and female power published in the 1970s. I was impressed most notably by the work of Albert Bacdayan (Western Bontoc), Jean Briggs (Eskimo), Kamene Okonjo (Igbo), Cara Richards (Onondaga), Susan Carol Rogers (peasants), Alice Schlegel (Hopi), and Nancy Tanner (matrifocal societies).³

The realization of the inadequacies in my initial conception was accompanied by the discovery that symbolism played a key role in channeling secular power roles. Preliminary analysis of the data indicated that sacred symbols are not, as I had originally supposed, an epiphenomena of secular power roles. In fact, it became clear that the reverse was more likely: Secular power roles are derived

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from ancient concepts of sacred power. This realization meant that I had to switch my theoretical stance midstream and become at least semiliterate in symbolic anthropology. Along these lines, I found the work of Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas the most helpful for seeking meaning below the surface details.

Moving into symbolic territory meant moving away from the positivist framework that normally accompanies the cross-cultural, large-sample approach. Examining various patterns of male dominance and female power in particular historical and cultural settings told me a great deal more than the skeletal information contained in statistical associations. And yet it was precisely these associations that guided my interpretation of specific situations and my overall framework for thinking about female power and male dominance. Only with time was I able to resolve the basic tension between explanation required by the positivist approach and interpretation required by the particular brand of the semiotic approach I adopted.

During this time certain individuals endured my search for intellectual sanity. Julie and Eric Sanday put up with their mother's strange moods after wrestling with "thick description" and the thinness of global comparison. Winthrop D. Jordan's conviction that the book would "make its way" sustained me through numerous drafts. Anyone who has read what he said about migrating men in his book *White over Black* will recognize the imprint of this way of approaching cultural analysis.⁴

Graduate students of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania worked as coders of information and as research assistants. Four students, in particular, contributed in a special way. Very early, Joan Schall convinced me that Mary Douglas's analysis of the meaning of taboos was pertinent. Devon Dederich (then an undergraduate student), Charles Hoffman, and Marilyn Lutz worked closely with me as I made the transition from one framework to another. At various times during the past five years or so, each of them spent hours with me going over questions that led to the point of view I finally developed. Though each contributed in large measure to the final result, each retains skepticism regarding particular details. The final product represents my distillation of the mix between my ideas and theirs.

When it came time to read a completed manuscript, Ruth and Ward Goodenough, Marilyn Lutz, and Charles Hoffman were

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particularly helpful. Based on their comments and those of anonymous reviewers, I completely rewrote the manuscript. The final version benefited considerably from the generous comments of Rayna Rapp. Finally, I want to thank the two typists who worked so hard for so long—Marion Pierpont and Renee Ffrench.

Peggy Reeves Sanday

University of Pennsylvania
January 1981