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978-0-521-33652-9 - Dealing with Inequality: Analysing Gender Relations in Melanesia and Beyond

Edited by Marilyn Strathern

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Dealing with inequality

The question of 'equality' between the sexes has been of long-standing interest among anthropologists, yet remains intransigent. This volume sets out not to dispose of the question, but rather to examine how to debate it. It recognises that inequality as a theoretical and practical concern is rooted in Western ideas and concepts, but also that there are palpable differences in power relations existing between men and women in non-Western societies, that are otherwise, in world terms 'egalitarian', and that these need to be accounted for.

The volume comprises ten essays by anthropologists who discuss the nature of social inequality between the sexes in societies they know through first-hand fieldwork, mostly, though not exclusively, in Melanesia. This regional focus gives an important coherence to the volume, and highlights the different analytical strategies that the contributors employ for accounting for gender inequality. Running through the essays is a commentary on the cultural bias of the observer, and the extent to which this influences Westerners' judgements about equality and inequality among non-Western peoples. By exploring indigenous concepts of 'agency', the contributors challenge the way in which Western observers commonly identify individual and collective action, and the power people claim for themselves, and, surprisingly, show that inequality is not reducible to relations of domination and subordination.

The volume as a whole will be provocative reading for anthropologists concerned with gender studies and the Pacific, and will be an invaluable resource for anyone who would turn to anthropology for cross-cultural insight into gender relations.

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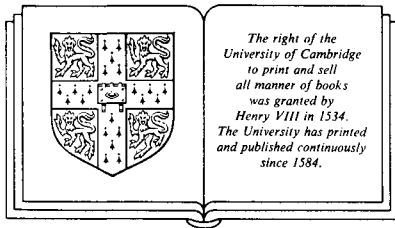
Dealing with inequality

Analysing gender relations in Melanesia and beyond

Essays by members of the 1983/1984 Anthropological
Research Group at the Research School of
Pacific Studies, The Australian National University

EDITED BY MARILYN STRATHERN

*Professor of Social Anthropology
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will be a monograph on the labour of femininity in a changing Maya world.

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fieldwork in North India. Before becoming head of the Department of Anthropology in Canberra, he taught at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

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JILL NASH, Professor of Anthropology, State University College of New York at Buffalo, 1300 Elmwood Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14222, USA. Jill Nash took her PhD from Harvard University. She maintains a dual interest in problems of matrilineal organisation and social change, as reflected in the title of her monograph on the Nagovisi of South Bougainville, *Matriliney and Modernisation* (1974).

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2601, Australia. Michael Young's account of ceremonial exchange on Goodenough Island in the Massim, *Fighting with Food* (1971), has been followed by an interpretation of mythical and biographical narrative, *Magicians of Manumanua: Living Myth in Kalauna* (1983). He came to The Australian National University from London and Cambridge (where he taught) and has worked in Indonesia as well as Melanesia.

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Editor's preface

Anthropologists, who place so much value on long periods of fieldwork, are rarely able to enjoy lengthy contact with colleagues from nearby field areas. The Research School of Pacific Studies at The Australian National University provided just such an opportunity over the two years 1983-1984.

'Gender Relations in the Southwestern Pacific: Ideology, Politics, and Production' was the title of a Research Group organised by Roger Keesing, Marie Reay and Michael Young in the School's Department of Anthropology. It attracted participants with fieldwork experience of Aboriginal Australia, Indonesia and Melanesia, though one of the contributors (Devereaux) to this volume has chosen to present comparisons drawn from fieldwork she had also undertaken elsewhere. Throughout the two years Melanesianists were in the majority, and Melanesian preoccupations dominate these essays. The preoccupations were perhaps saved from becoming obsessions by the salutary and valuable presence of the non-Melanesianists.

Theoretical interests among the Group's members certainly cross-cut their regional specialisms, as is reflected in the organisation of this collection. Other volumes arising from the Group's activities are in the process of preparation: Margaret Jolly and Martha Macintyre are editing the proceedings of a conference on Christianity, Colonialism and Transformations of Family and Household in the South Pacific held in 1983, at the end of the Group's first year, and Deborah Gewertz those of a conference at the end of the second year on Myths of Matriarchy. Individual members have also been productive on their own account. I speak for us all in collective acknowledgement of the generosity with which The Australian National University has made this work possible. The present book is not itself, however, a collective undertaking in the accepted sense of the term. On the contrary, as the Introduction makes

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clear, we have endeavoured to preserve the differences between us as well as our common ground.

Several of the Group enjoyed a year or more of contact with their colleagues; others came for shorter periods of two to six months. Overlapping participation, as well as overlapping interests, has meant that not all the members are represented here even though they contributed substantially through debate and criticism: they include Michael Allen, Margaret Jolly, Mervyn Meggitt, Douglas Lewis, Kerry James and Nicholas Modjeska. In addition to her general contributions, Marie Reay commented helpfully on a number of the chapters. We would also thank Terence Hays for his participation while these chapters were in their final stages, and for the critical scrutiny he gave them.

The Group has profited from the congenial company of other members of the Department of Anthropology (R.S.Pac.S.) and its sister department in the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology in the Faculties. Among those who participated in the discussions which led to essays presented here were Gregory Acciaioli, Patsy Asch, Shirley Campbell, Nerida Cook, Christine Helliwell, Simon Harrison, Robin Hide, Maureen Mackenzie, Caroline Ifeka, Cecilia Ng, Kalpana Ram and Nicholas Thomas, and from outside Anthropology, Suzanne Dixon and Evelyn Hogan. Several visitors gave us the benefit of seminars and working papers. In connection with the specific themes of these chapters, mention should be made of Amy Burce, Gillian Gillison, Rena Lederman, Diane Losche and Jean-Marc Philibert.

The support, skill and patience of Ann Buller, Helen Collins, Ita Pead, Judith Wilson and Ria van de Zandt are tremendously appreciated. The map was prepared by the Cartography Department in the Research School of Pacific Studies.

* * *

There is often an imbalance in a work of this kind between the scrupulous naming of those who have helped in its production and all those who were in fact the cause of it. I mean here the people whose lives and societies we have taken the liberty of describing. The imbalance reflects of course the quite different orders of magnitude involved. All of us are conscious of a considerable debt to our various hosts. But it is not to be discharged through an easy word of thanks. The gratitude I record here can do no more than simply acknowledge the fact of debt itself.

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The question of 'equality' between the sexes has fuelled attention to gender issues within anthropology since the early 1970s. It remains intransigent. Indeed, because the debate over equality and inequality speaks so closely to concerns of our own in the 'Western' world, the question is never disposed of, and we do not propose to dispose of it here. Rather we propose something both novel and realistic: to take the debate as a debate, and thus locate its inspiration in specific concerns without thereby performing a vanishing trick. We may deal with equality as a Western concept; that still leaves us having to deal with the nature of the palpable differences in power relations between the sexes for non-Western societies.

The contributors enquire into how effective social action is conceived and implemented, how men and women differ or compare in their effect on others, how we may regard them as significant social agents. In this region as a whole, such considerations lead into wealth transactions, ritual and cult participation, and control over speech making. That these are societies whose politics are, in world terms, 'egalitarian' gives the analysis of agency a particular interest.

MARILYN STRATHERN

*Canberra, August 1984**Manchester, March 1986*

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