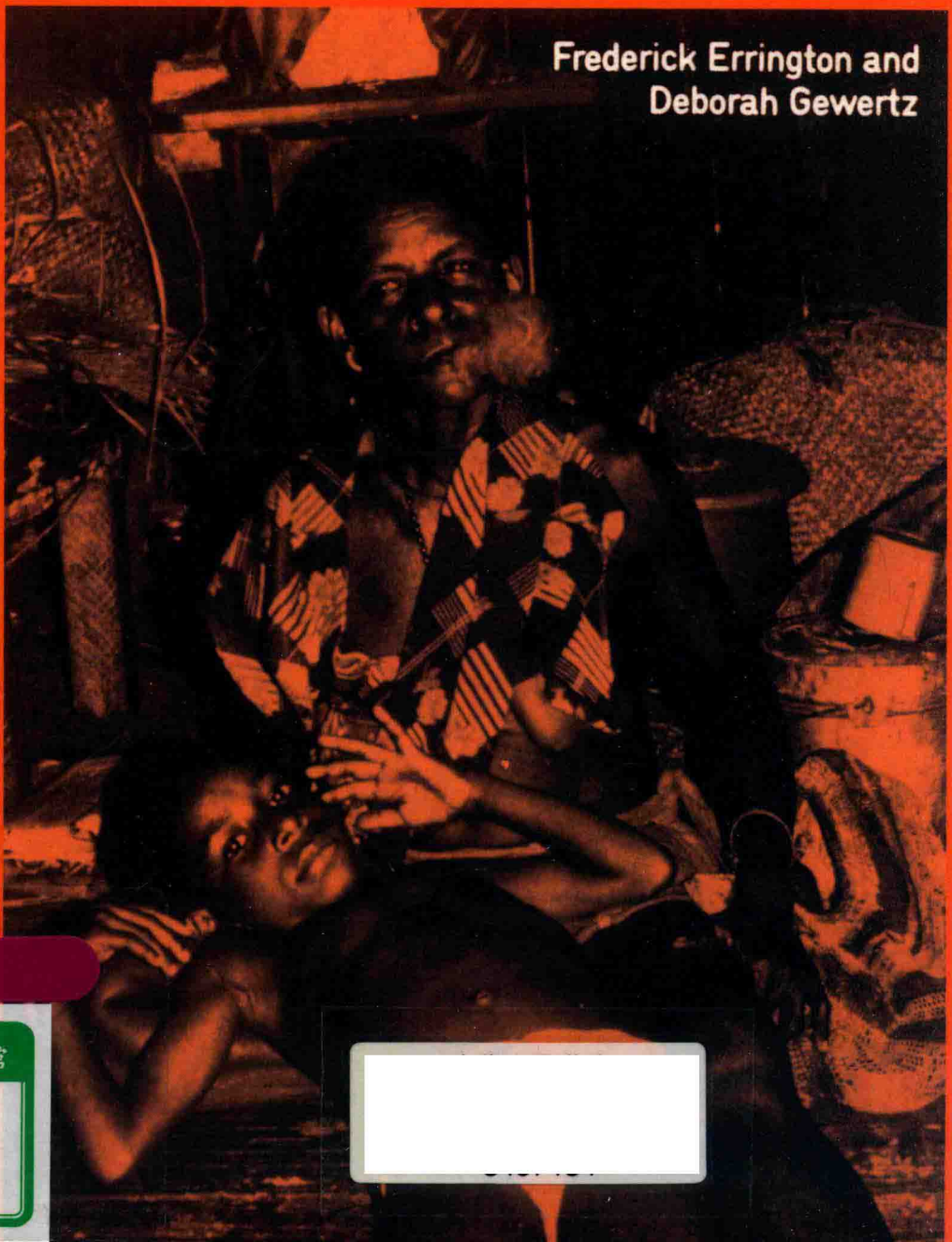
Cultural alternatives & a feminist anthropology

An analysis of culturally constructed gender interests in Papua New Guinea



Frederick Errington and
Deborah Gewertz

Cultural alternatives and a feminist anthropology

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Cultural alternatives and a feminist anthropology

To
Carolyn Errington
and
Frederica Goldsmith

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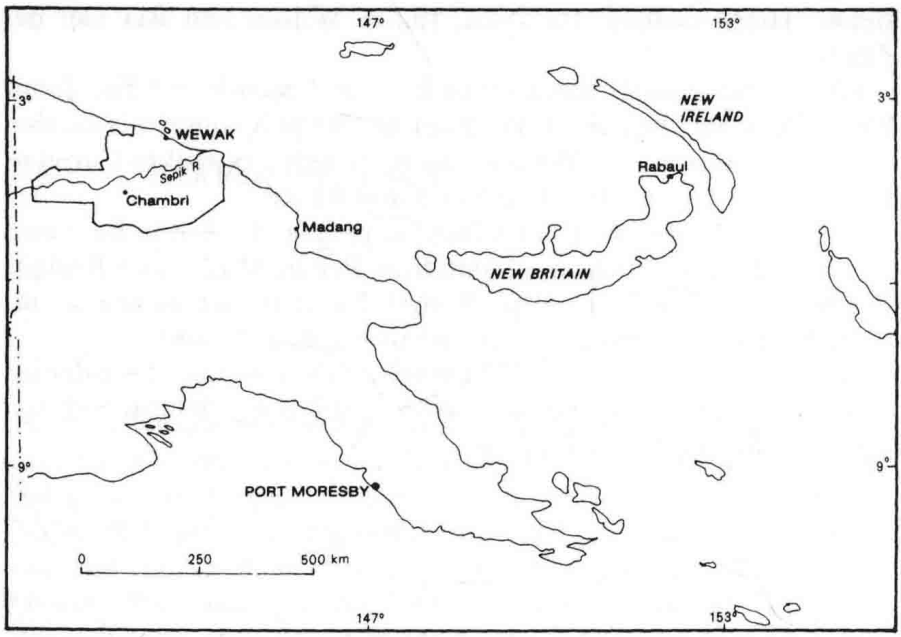
Finally, we wish to note at the outset of this book that the order in which our names appear as authors has been determined by alphabetical consideration alone.



Map 1. The Chambri of the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea

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The promise of cultural alternatives

Anthropologists necessarily must be conscious of their own personal and cultural identity when they do research in societies with exotic cultures. Their emotional and intellectual predispositions constitute perspectives which are sources both of misinterpretation and – as bases of contrast – of analytic clarity.[1] It is hard to imagine an instance in which the relationship between the perspective held by an anthropologist and the socio-cultural "reality" under examination is more complex than in this present study. We are two anthropologists, a husband and wife, examining male–female relationships among a people, the Chambri (see Map 1), whom another husband and wife team, Reo Fortune and Margaret Mead, studied, and who were made famous by Mead as the "Tchambuli" – a society in which women dominated over men.

A Chambri artifact with a curious history has come to embody much of this complexity for us. Shortly before we were to leave Chambri in early 1984, we were talking to Andrew Yorondu, Deborah Gewertz's best friend and informant during her two previous field trips, about his experiences during World War II. While Frederick Errington was preparing to play back the recording just made of Yorondu's account, Deborah jokingly told the old man that some of his personal history had already been inscribed. To demonstrate, she began reading from her copy of Reo Fortune's unpublished field notes. There, Fortune describes a ceremony for the validation of a war canoe which he and Margaret Mead had observed in 1933 while they lived among the Chambri. We read to Yorondu about "Yauranda, the nine or ten year old son of Kwolikumbi [who] chew[ed] betel nut and lime standing in the canoe at the stern and looking out sternward."[2] We continued about how he was to spit the betel nut juice onto a *talimbun* shell (a green snail

shell, *Turbo marmoratus*) which had been placed in the prow and then call the canoe's name, but the "child was abashed by so many spectators and remained silent – so that others about announced the name as if the child had said it" (Fortune, 1933a).

Yorondu was delighted by this excursion into his past and with evident amusement completed the story of his childhood embarrassment. He had, it seems, been so mortified by his incapacity to speak that he had fled into the bush, not to return home that night.

When Yorondu visited us the following day, he had, in his turn, a surprise for us: a battered, rusty, trade store hatchet that Fortune had given his father, Kwolikumbi, in exchange for the war trophy of a decorated human skull. Yorondu wanted to give us this hatchet as a farewell gift because, he said, it was fitting that it return to its source.

We do not know whether this gift was to close a relationship or to continue one. It was probably intended to close our relationship because when we said our final goodbyes to each other a few days later he said that on our next visit he would already be dead. In any case, the hatchet conveyed for him much about the nature of his life, particularly as it had been marked by the visits of anthropologists.[3]

We had, of course, previously thought many times about the relationship between the data and analyses of Mead and Fortune and our own. However, Yorondu's gift of the hatchet he had inherited from his father, based on the Chambri perception of us all as comparable Europeans, made us examine the interpersonal link between the two generations of anthropologists. What, after all, did it mean to be the heirs of Reo Fortune and Margaret Mead? And it was again Yorondu who provided the context which encouraged us to think further about this question.

Yorondu had always worked intensively with Deborah on all aspects of Chambri culture. She had sat next to him in his men's house, had tape-recorded his esoteric ritual secrets and had seen all – she thought – of his ritual paraphernalia. She was astonished, therefore, when he invited Frederick, but not her, to see and hear about powerful ritual objects which she had not known existed. On a small table next to the centerpost of his house he normally displayed such items as his radio, his two copies of the Bible, a photograph of him holding a small crocodile (a photograph Deborah had taken of him almost 10 years before), his ceremonial headdress and the lime spatula decorated with feathers, each feather to signify a death for which he took credit. For this occasion,

Photograph 1. Yorondu's shell embossed clay flute

however, he had augmented the usual display with six bamboo flutes, two blackened *talimbun* shells and, as the most sacred object, his shell-embossed clay flute, whose ancestral voice, he said, spoke without human assistance of enemy deaths.

After Deborah protested to Yorondu that she had always been privy to his ritual knowledge, he allowed her to accompany Frederick to this new display. He, however, did send his wife, daughter, and several visiting kinswomen from the house before he explained the significance of these objects to us. These women were far from disconcerted by their exclusion and continued to chat with each other, somewhat bemused by Yorondu's preoccupation with ritual items.

Only Deborah was annoyed. She realized that the exhibition and explanation of these objects would not have taken place without Frederick's presence. But why exactly should this annoy her, we later wondered, when it scarcely even occasioned the notice of Chambri women? Evidently, none of them wished to have access to male ritual knowledge or to otherwise be like the Chambri men.

Nor, on reflection, did Deborah. Nor, for that matter, did Frederick wish to be defined in the manner of Chambri men.

Deborah had been annoyed and Frederick little gratified because, at least on the occasion of Yorondu's revelation, our *fundamental* identity – and, consequently, our access to particular sorts of experience – had been defined in terms of criteria which were both categorical and social. Definition according to such criteria, we felt, discounted our own sense of personal identity, our own sense of individuality. Although, to be sure, we regarded ourselves as having gender, we also were, in our view, a particular man and a particular woman, each of whom had developed (and should be allowed to continue to develop) a set of relatively unique dispositions, capacities and perspectives.[4] Unfortunately, both the criteria through which Chambri men and women are defined and the relative exclusivity of their respective realms became more applicable to us once we entered their social life as a man and a woman. As an anthropologist actively engaging in Chambri social life, Frederick had made Deborah more comprehensible to the Chambri as a woman and wife.[5] But, as her identity became increasingly acceptable to them, it became less so to her.

How ironic, we reflected, that this discovery should take place during field work among the Chambri – where Margaret Mead thought she had observed men waiting on the words of women, an observation, she hoped, that would help American women to change their relationships with men and thus strengthen their own identities. Clearly, we realized from our reactions, neither Chambri men nor women could provide direct models for American men and women. To be the heirs of Fortune and Mead, we now came to realize, meant that we must examine once again those sociocultural arrangements that provided the identity and the experience of Chambri men and women and to reconsider the relationship of those Chambri lives to our own.

When Margaret Mead traveled with Reo Fortune to the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea in 1933, her plan was "to study the different ways in which cultures patterned the expected behavior of males and females" (1972: 196). Later that year, settled among the Tchambuli, she began to wonder:

> What if human beings, innately different at birth, could be shown to fit into systematically defined temperamental types, and what if there were male and female versions of each of these temperamental types? And what if a

society – by the way in which children were reared, by the kinds of behavior that were rewarded or punished, and by its traditional depiction of heroes, heroines, and villains, witches, sorcerers, and supernaturals – could place its major emphasis on one type of temperament, as among the Arapesh or Mundugumor, or could, instead, emphasize a special complementarity among the sexes, as the Iatmul and the Tchambuli did? And what if the expectations about male-female differences, so characteristic of Euro-American cultures, could be reversed, as they seemed to be in Tchambuli, where women were brisk and cooperative, whereas men were responsive, subject to the choices of women, and characterized by the kinds of cattiness, jealousy, and moodiness that feminists had claimed were the outcome of women's subservient and dependent role? (1972: 216)

Her answers to these questions in *Sex and Temperament* (1935) and *Male and Female* (1949) have become widely known to specialists in anthropology and women's studies, as well as to members of the general public, including Deborah's mother, who was given a copy of *Male and Female* in 1952, four years after Deborah was born. She consulted it from time to time until Deborah, a fledgling anthropologist about to embrace Melanesia as her "culture area," appropriated it from her. It was not, however, until we began to write this book, some 12 years after *Male and Female* became Deborah's, that we read carefully the message its donor had inscribed.

In clearing out my overflow of books, I thought you'd like this, Fredi – it helps explain a lot of the stereotyped misconceptions about the "feminine" male types and "masculine" female types – very important in helping to understand young people today, and even those of us who are "older and wiser."

Before she passed the book on, Deborah's mother's friend underlined the following passage:

A recognition of these possibilities [for flexibility within gender role assignment] would change a great many of our present-day practices of rearing children. We would cease to describe the behaviour of the boy who showed an interest in occupations regarded as female, or a greater sensitivity than his fellows, as "on the female" side, and could ask instead what kind of male he was going to be. We would take instead the primary fact of sex membership as a cross-constitutional classification, just as on a wider scale the fact of sex can be used to classify together male rabbits and male lions and male deer, but would never be permitted to obscure for us their essential rabbit, lion, and deer characteristics. Then the little girl who shows a greater need to take things apart than most of the other little girls need not be classified as a female of a certain kind . . .

> If we are to provide the impetus for surmounting the trials and obstacles of this most difficult period in history, man must be sustained by a vision of a future so rewarding that no sacrifice is too great to continue the journey towards it. In that picture of the future, the degree to which men and women can feel at home with their bodies, and at home in their relationships with their own sex and with the opposite sex, is extremely important. (1949: 142)

The trials and obstacles to be faced during the late 1940s, according to Mead, would be those encountered in the attempt to build a global culture in which individuals would have freedom to develop their potentialities (see Mead, 1949: 12–14). Deborah's mother, and many like her, responded by socializing their children in as liberated a fashion as possible. To change the world, they believed, meant changing its children.[6] But this new generation of children, particularly the daughters who had not been classified as "masculine" females and who were encouraged to take things apart, began to unravel the connection between a life of child rearing and a world of personal fulfillment.

Many of these daughters had come to view their mothers as restricted to the suburbs by a capitalist economy needing women as occasional workers and as full-time consumers.[7] These daughters argued that instead of eliminating national and global inequalities, the child-centered existences of their mothers had merely reproduced them.

In yet another way Mead's work on gender roles came to figure importantly in their lives. Their primary interest shifted: whereas they had learned about cross-cultural variation in definitions of male and female so that they could socialize their children to achieve freedom through defining their own gender roles, they now learned from Mead's descriptions of different sociocultural arrangements so that they themselves might achieve freedom through obtaining power hitherto monopolized by men. Among the different societies Mead described, the Chambri had perhaps the most significance for them because within that society, they thought, women exercised power. For instance, Mead had written in *Sex and Temperament*:

> For although Tchambuli is patrilineal in organization, although there is polygyny and a man pays for his wife – two institutions that have been popularly supposed to degrade women – it is the women in Tchambuli who have the real position of power in society. The patrilineal system includes houses and land, residence land and gardening-land, but only an occasional particularly energetic man gardens. For food, the people depend