

SEX AND  
TEMPERAMENT  
IN THREE PRIMITIVE  
SOCIETIES

By

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WILLIAM MORROW & COMPANY

NEW YORK

MCMXXXV

*To*  
FRANZ BOAS

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE results recorded in the following chapters are part of the material accumulated by Dr. Fortune and myself during our two years' expedition to New Guinea, in 1931-33. My part of the investigation was undertaken in regular pursuit of my duties in the anthropological department of the American Museum of Natural History, and my expedition was financed by the Voss Research Fund. I owe, therefore, very special thanks to the Museum, and particularly to Dr. Clark Wissler, Curator-in-Chief of the Department of Anthropology of that institution, for the opportunity to pursue these researches. Dr. Fortune's work was conducted under a grant from the Social Science Research Council of Columbia University. Working together throughout the expedition made it possible for us to share and thus reduce many of our expenses, and my thanks are therefore due to both the bodies that supported our respective researches.

For assistance in the field my major thanks are due to Dr. Fortune, for the partnership that made it possible for me to work with peoples more savage and more inaccessibly located than I would have been able to reach alone; for co-operation in the collection of the linguistic and ethnological material upon which these studies are based; and for much concrete material concerning the men's cults and all those aspects of the men's lives which a woman ethnologist is practically debarred from studying. I am particularly indebted for his analysis of the very difficult Arapesh language, and for accounts of ceremonies that took place outside of Alitoea, to which the precipitous nature of the country confined

me—more especially for material bearing upon the Plains. The division of labour between us varied from one tribe to another. Among the Mundugumor and the Tchambuli a larger share of the ethnographical work fell to him; for this reason I have treated the Arapesh most extensively and in treating of the other two tribes I have given only the minimum of ethnographic material that is necessary to an understanding of the special problems discussed.

For preliminary orientation in the selection of a field, which finally resulted in the choice of the Arapesh region, I am indebted to Dr. Briggs of Sydney University, who had made a survey trip through this region some years previously. For the background of the work in Tchambuli, I am indebted to Mr. Bateson's published and unpublished work, and to his assistance in obtaining some knowledge of the culture of the Middle Sepik, which made it possible to conduct research in Tchambuli as an intensive study of a variant of a known cultural form.

For administrative endorsement I have to thank the Department of Home and Territories of the Commonwealth of Australia. For assistance, encouragement, and hospitality on the part of members of the Government, I am indebted to His Honour the Acting Administrator, Judge Wanless; to His Honour Judge Phillips; to Mr. Chinnery, Government Anthropologist; to District Officers T. E. McAdam and E. D. Robinson; to Patrol Officers MacDonald, Thomas, and Bloxam. I am specially indebted to Mr. and Mrs. M. V. Cobb of Karawop Plantation, who offered me the most extensive hospitality and permitted me the use of their plantation as a base during the Arapesh work. For many courtesies, especially in the matter of transportation of supplies, I have to thank Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Ifould of Boram, Mr. and Mrs. Mackenzie of the *Lady Betty*, and Messrs. Mason, Overall, Gibson, and Eichorn.

This manuscript was prepared while the impressions derived from the Seminar on Human Relations, held at Hanover in the summer of 1934, were still fresh in my mind, and I wish to acknowledge my special indebtedness to Mr. Laurence K. Frank and Dr. Earle T. Engle for insights developed during the seminar. I am further most particularly indebted for criticisms of the theoretical approach and for detailed assistance in the organization of the manuscript to Dr. Ruth F. Benedict and Dr. John Dollard. For assistance in the preparation of the manuscript I have to thank my mother, Emily Fogg Mead, Miss Marie Eichelberger, Miss Isabel Ely Lord, and Mrs. Violet Whittington.

M. M.

*The American Museum of Natural History*

*New York*

*January, 1935*

## INTRODUCTION

WHEN we study the simpler societies, we cannot but be impressed with the many ways in which man has taken a few hints and woven them into the beautiful imaginative social fabrics that we call civilizations. His natural environment provided him with a few striking periodicities and contrasts—day and night, the change of seasons, the untiring waxing and waning of the moon, the spawning of fish and the migration-times of animals and birds. His own physical nature provided other striking points—age and sex, the rhythm of birth, maturation, and senescence, the structure of blood-relationship. Differences between one animal and another, between one individual and another, differences in fierceness or in tenderness, in bravery or in cunning, in richness of imagination or plodding dulness of wit—these provided hints out of which the ideas of rank and caste, of special priesthoods, of the artist and the oracle, could be developed. Working with clues as universal and as simple as these, man made for himself a fabric of culture within which each human life was dignified by form and meaning. Man became not merely one of the beasts that mated, fought for its food, and died, but a human being, with a name, a position, and a god. Each people makes this fabric differently, selects some clues and ignores others, emphasizes a different sector of the whole arc of human potentialities. Where one culture uses as a main thread the vulnerable ego, quick to take insult or perish of shame, another selects uncompromising bravery and even, so that there may be no admitted cowards, may like the Cheyenne Indians invent a specially complicated

social position for the overfearful. Each simple, homogeneous culture can give scope to only a few of the varied human endowments, disallowing or penalizing others too antithetical or too unrelated to its major emphases to find room within its walls. Having originally taken its values from the values dear to some human temperaments and alien to others, a culture embodies these values more and more firmly in its structure, in its political and religious systems, in its art and its literature; and each new generation is shaped, firmly and definitely, to the dominant trends.

Now as each culture creates distinctively the social fabric in which the human spirit can wrap itself safely and intelligibly, sorting, reweaving, and discarding threads in the historical tradition that it shares with many neighbouring peoples, it may bend every individual born within it to one type of behaviour, recognizing neither age, sex, nor special disposition as points for differential elaboration. Or a culture may seize upon the very obvious facts of difference in age, in sex, in strength, in beauty, or the unusual variations, such as a native propensity to see visions or dream dreams, and make these dominant cultural themes. So societies such as those of the Masai and the Zulus make a grading of all individuals by age a basic point of organization, and the Akikiyu of East Africa make a major drama out of the ceremonial ousting of the older generation by the younger. The aborigines of Siberia dignified the nervously unstable individual into the shaman, whose utterances were believed to be supernaturally inspired and were a law to his more nervously stable fellow-tribesmen. Such an extreme case as this, where a whole people bows down before the word of an individual whom we would classify as insane, seems clear enough to us. The Siberians have imaginatively and from the point of view of our society unjustifiably, elevated an abnormal person into a socially important one. They have built upon a human

deviation that we would disallow, or if it became troublesome, imprison.

If we hear that among the Mundugumor people of New Guinea children born with the umbilical cord wound around their necks are singled out as of native and indisputable right artists, we feel that here is a culture which has not merely institutionalized a kind of temperament that we regard as abnormal—as in the case of the Siberian shaman—but also a culture that has arbitrarily associated, in an artificial and imaginative way, two completely unrelated points: manner of birth and an ability to paint intricate designs upon pieces of bark. When we learn further that so firmly is this association insisted upon that only those who are so born can paint good pictures, while the man born without a strangulating cord labours humble and unarrogant, and never attains any virtuosity, we see the strength that lies in such irrelevant associations once they are firmly embedded in the culture.

Even when we encounter less glaring cases of cultural elaboration, when we read of a people in which the first-born son is regarded as different in kind from his later-born brethren, we realize that here again the human imagination has been at work, re-evaluating a simple biological fact. Although our own historical tradition hints to us that the first-born is “naturally” a little more important than the others, still when we hear that among the Maori the first-born son of a chief was so sacred that only special persons could cut his infant locks without risking death from the contact, we recognize that man has taken the accident of order of birth and raised a superstructure of rank upon it. Our critical detachment, our ability to smile over these imaginative flights of fancy—which see in the first-born or the last-born, the seventh child of the seventh child, the twin, or the infant born in a caul a being specially endowed with precious or maleficent powers—remains undisturbed.



But if we turn from these "self-evident" primitive constructs to points of elaboration that we share with primitive peoples, to points concerning which we are no longer spectators, but instead are deeply involved, our detachment vanishes. It is no doubt purely imaginative to attribute ability to paint to birth with the cord about the neck, or the power to write poetry to one born a twin. To choose leaders or oracles from aberrant and unusual temperaments that we brand as insane is not wholly imaginative, but at least is based on a very different premise, which selects a natural potentiality of the human race that we neither use nor honour. But the insistence upon a thousand and one innate differences between men and women, differences many of which show no more immediate relationship to the biological facts of sex than does ability to paint to manner of birth, other differences which show a congruence with sex that is neither universal nor necessary—as is the case in the association of epileptic seizure and religious gift—this indeed we do not regard as an imaginative creation of the human mind busy patterning a bare existence with meaning.

This study is not concerned with whether there are or are not actual and universal differences between the sexes, either quantitative or qualitative. It is not concerned with whether women are more variable than men, which was claimed before the doctrine of evolution exalted variability, or less variable, which was claimed afterwards. It is not a treatise on the rights of women, nor an inquiry into the basis of feminism. It is, very simply, an account of how three primitive societies have grouped their social attitudes towards temperament about the very obvious facts of sex-difference. I studied this problem in simple societies because here we have the drama of civilization writ small, a social microcosm alike in kind, but different in size and magnitude, from the complex social structures of peoples who, like our

own, depend upon a written tradition and upon the integration of a great number of conflicting historical traditions. Among the gentle mountain-dwelling Arapesh, the fierce cannibalistic Mundugumor, and the graceful head-hunters of Tchambuli, I studied this question. Each of these tribes had, as has every human society, the point of sex-difference to use as one theme in the plot of social life, and each of these three peoples has developed that theme differently. In comparing the way in which they have dramatized sex-difference, it is possible to gain a greater insight into what elements are social constructs, originally irrelevant to the biological facts of sex-gender.

Our own society makes great use of this plot. It assigns different rôles to the two sexes, surrounds them from birth with an expectation of different behaviour, plays out the whole drama of courtship, marriage, and parenthood in terms of types of behaviour believed to be innate and therefore appropriate for one sex or for the other. We know dimly that these rôles have changed even within our history. Studies like Mrs. Putnam's *The Lady*<sup>1</sup> depict woman as an infinitely malleable lay figure upon which mankind has draped ever varying period-costumes, in keeping with which she wilted or waxed imperious, flirted or fled. But all discussions have emphasized not the relative social personalities assigned to the two sexes, but rather the superficial behaviour-patterns assigned to women, often not even to all women, but only to women of the upper class. A sophisticated recognition that upper-class women were puppets of a changing tradition blurred rather than clarified the issue. It left untouched the rôles assigned to men, who were conceived as proceeding along a special masculine road, shaping women to their fads and whims in womanliness. All discussion of the position of women, of the character and tem-

<sup>1</sup> E. J. S. Putnam, *The Lady*, Sturgis & Walton, 1910.

perament of women, the enslavement or the emancipation of women, obscures the basic issue—the recognition that the cultural plot behind human relations is the way in which the rôles of the two sexes are conceived, and that the growing boy is shaped to a local and special emphasis as inexorably as is the growing girl.

The Vaërtings attacked the problem in their book *The Dominant Sex*<sup>2</sup> with their critical imagination handicapped by European cultural tradition. They knew that in some parts of the world there had been and still were matriarchal institutions which gave to women a freedom of action, endowed women with an independence of choice that historical European culture granted only to men. By simple sleight-of-hand they reversed the European situation, and built up an interpretation of matriarchal societies that saw women as cold, proud, and dominant, men as weak and submissive. The attributes of women in Europe were foisted upon men in matriarchal communities—that was all. It was a simple picture, which really added nothing to our understanding of the problem, based as it was upon the limiting concept that if one sex is dominating in personality, the other sex must be *ipso facto* submissive. The root of the Vaërtings' mistake lies in our traditional insistence upon contrasts between the personality of the two sexes, in our ability to see only one variation upon the theme of the dominant male, and that the hen-pecked husband. They did conceive, however, of the possibility of a different arrangement of dominance from our traditional one, mainly because to thinking based upon patriarchal institutions the very existence of a matriarchal form of society carries with it an implication of an imaginary reversal of the temperamental position of the two sexes.

But recent studies of primitive peoples have made us

<sup>2</sup> Mathilde and Mathis Vaërting, *The Dominant Sex*, Doran, 1923.

more sophisticated.<sup>8</sup> We know that human cultures do not all fall into one side or the other of a single scale and that it is possible for one society to ignore completely an issue which two other societies have solved in contrasting ways. Because a people honour the old may mean that they hold children in slight esteem, but a people may also, like the Ba Thonga of South Africa, honour neither old people nor children; or, like the Plains Indians, dignify the little child and the grandfather; or, again, like the Manus and parts of modern America, regard children as the most important group in society. In expecting simple reversals—that if an aspect of social life is not specifically sacred, it must be specifically secular; that if men are strong, women must be weak—we ignore the fact that cultures exercise far greater licence than this in selecting the possible aspects of human life which they will minimize, overemphasize, or ignore. And while every culture has in some way institutionalized the rôles of men and women, it has not necessarily been in terms of contrast between the prescribed personalities of the two sexes, nor in terms of dominance or submission. With the paucity of material for elaboration, no culture has failed to seize upon the conspicuous facts of age and sex in some way, whether it be the convention of one Philippine tribe that no man can keep a secret, the Manus assumption that only men enjoy playing with babies, the Toda prescription of almost all domestic work as too sacred for women, or the Arapesh insistence that women's heads are stronger than men's. In the division of labour, in dress, in manners, in social and religious functioning—sometimes in only a few of these respects, sometimes in all—men and women are socially differentiated, and each sex, as a sex, forced to conform to the rôle assigned to it. In some societies, these socially defined rôles are

<sup>8</sup> See especially Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, Houghton Mifflin, 1934.

mainly expressed in dress or occupation, with no insistence upon innate temperamental differences. Women wear long hair and men wear short hair, or men wear curls and women shave their heads; women wear skirts and men wear trousers, or women wear trousers and men wear skirts. Women weave and men do not, or men weave and women do not. Such simple tie-ups as these between dress or occupation and sex are easily taught to every child and make no assumptions to which a given child cannot easily conform.

It is otherwise in societies that sharply differentiate the behaviour of men and of women in terms which assume a genuine difference in temperament. Among the Dakota Indians of the Plains, the importance of an ability to stand any degree of danger or hardship was frantically insisted upon as a masculine characteristic. From the time that a boy was five or six, all the conscious educational effort of the household was bent towards shaping him into an indubitable male. Every tear, every timidity, every clinging to a protective hand or desire to continue to play with younger children or with girls, was obsessively interpreted as proof that he was not going to develop into a real man. In such a society it is not surprising to find the *berdache*, the man who had voluntarily given up the struggle to conform to the masculine rôle and who wore female attire and followed the occupations of a woman. The institution of the *berdache* in turn served as a warning to every father; the fear that the son might become a *berdache* informed the parental efforts with an extra desperation, and the very pressure which helped to drive a boy to that choice was redoubled. The invert who lacks any discernible physical basis for his inversion has long puzzled students of sex, who when they can find no observable glandular abnormality turn to theories of early conditioning or identification with a parent of opposite sex. In the course of this investigation, we shall have occasion to ex-

amine the "masculine" woman and the "feminine" man as they occur in these different tribes, to inquire whether it is always a woman of dominating nature who is conceived as masculine, or a man who is gentle, submissive, or fond of children or embroidery who is conceived as feminine.

In the following chapters we shall be concerned with the patterning of sex-behaviour from the standpoint of temperament, with the cultural assumptions that certain temperamental attitudes are "naturally" masculine and others "naturally" feminine. In this matter, primitive people seem to be, on the surface, more sophisticated than we are. Just as they know that the gods, the food habits, and the marriage customs of the next tribe differ from those of their own people, and do not insist that one form is true or natural while the other is false or unnatural, so they often know that the temperamental proclivities which they regard as natural for men or for women differ from the natural temperaments of the men and women among their neighbours. Nevertheless, within a narrower range and with less of a claim for the biological or divine validity of their social forms than we often advance, each tribe has certain definite attitudes towards temperament, a theory of what human beings, either men or women or both, are naturally like, a norm in terms of which to judge and condemn those individuals who deviate from it.

Two of these tribes have no idea that men and women are different in temperament. They allow them different economic and religious rôles, different skills, different vulnerabilities to evil magic and supernatural influences. The Arapesh believe that painting in colour is appropriate only to men, and the Mundugumor consider fishing an essentially feminine task. But any idea that temperamental traits of the order of dominance, bravery, aggressiveness, objectivity, malleability, are inalienably associated with one sex (as op-

posed to the other) is entirely lacking. This may seem strange to a civilization which in its sociology, its medicine, its slang, its poetry, and its obscenity accepts the socially defined differences between the sexes as having an innate basis in temperament and explains any deviation from the socially determined rôle as abnormality of native endowment or early maturation. It came as a surprise to me because I too had been accustomed to use in my thinking such concepts as "mixed type," to think of some men as having "feminine" temperaments, of some women as having "masculine" minds. I set as my problem a study of the conditioning of the social personalities of the two sexes, in the hope that such an investigation would throw some light upon sex-differences. I shared the general belief of our society that there was a natural sex-temperament which could at the most only be distorted or diverted from normal expression. I was innocent of any suspicion that the temperaments which we regard as native to one sex might instead be mere variations of human temperament, to which the members of either or both sexes may, with more or less success in the case of different individuals, be educated to approximate.

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